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To Love is Human:

Leonid Zorin's *A Warsaw Melody* Considering Concepts Love and Fate in Russian
Culture Reflected in its Theatre Tradition

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Honors Thesis in Theatre

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There is no such thing as a happy ending in a Russian story. Leonid Zorin's *A Warsaw Melody* shows us that love is what it means to be human, that love can even transcend fate but more often than not, the tragedy of that humanity comes from the inability to escape its falling apart. *A Warsaw Melody* is a tragic love story, in the Russian sense. In Russian theatre, tragedy comes from forces within rather than outside the characters. This makes for a more painful tragic structure, especially because we can recognize this same tendency in ourselves. The concept of fate is pervasive in Russian culture. However, it looks different than the concept of fate in our culture. The Russian concept of "судьба" cannot fully be translated into English —the closest thing our culture has is fate. We can describe this concept as the belief that every person has a predetermined destiny, although that destiny is not known to the people in question. The relationship between a person and their fate like that with another entity. Fate can be encountered. One can act in ways that oppose that fate or are in accordance with it. In western theatre, tragedies have characters with predetermined destinies, and in some cases, they are even aware of them. In attempts to stave off their foretold outcomes, they make choices that lead them right into the 'jaws' of destiny. In other words, they fall victim to self-fulfilling prophecies. On the other hand, Russian stories allow for more free will. In doing so, Russian drama gives us a clear and potent picture of humanity in all its dysfunction and pain by looking at what it means to be human. Love is at the core of humanity and is the backbone of *A Warsaw Melody* and many Russian stories.

Characters like Helya and Victor in *A Warsaw Melody* choose different paths and are driven further apart by time. Their lives, and by extension, their destinies, are in their own hands. These elements add to the slow-burn quality of Slavic stories accompanied by a gradual yet

painful bleeding out of the heart. Characterized by realistic style pioneered by Chekhov, who brought the expectation of witnessing a semblance of real life to the theatre, a hitherto unheard-of mode of performance. The story and meaning of these plays are hidden in what is unsaid. On paper, nothing is said at all, but onstage it looks like real life. This subtle undercurrent is what makes it so compelling and viscerally relatable. Considering the context of the Soviet Union and its strict censorship laws at the time, *A Warsaw Melody* shows us the importance of expression without words. The music in this play gives the audience direct access to the soul of the story. This notion of undercurrent is why I am so drawn to stories about Soviet Russia. There is an element of restriction overlaid on daily life that subdues outwardly but does not stop the flow of passion and culture in Russian society. These passions are as fervent as ever but are held just under the 'surface' of the production.

People desire catharsis when they go to the theatre. But there is no moment of catharsis in these plays, no final culminating battle scene, and no happily ever after. As a result, audiences are left longing for something more—some sense of closure. Catharsis gives audiences an outlet for their experiences by providing opportunities to empathize with the characters onstage. In general, this shared experience gives validity to the struggles of humanity and allows us to believe in a greater purpose because the struggles of the characters are met with a definitive answer. Russian theatre breaks our hearts with its lack of satisfaction and strikes all too close to home.

I committed to directing this play before I read it in English. I stumbled across *A Warsaw Melody* by accident, and saw it by virtue of available student tickets. The production was

directed by Sergei Schipitsin at Maly Drama in St. Petersburg. The performance was in Russian, and I understood very little of it. Yet, I found that understanding the language was not crucial to being affected by this work. A feeling of longing pervaded, that dull ache of longing is incredibly characteristic of Slavic stories. As I watched this play, a clear story was apparent to me.

This play is about two characters, Helya, a Polish woman, and Victor, a Russian man, who fall in love under Stalin's control. In the story, Stalin passes a law forbidding marriage to foreigners, forcing the two to go their separate ways. The play revisits them later in their lives, examining the paths they have taken apart from each other and pondering what could have been. Following the form of typical Russian drama, the tragedy is more internal, and although the characters may have a way out of it, they fail to make the choices that would save them. There is something particularly poignant and incredibly frustrating about that. It speaks to something we see in ourselves and is painfully human. *A Warsaw Melody* is about a love between two people, the insidiousness of politics and things outside of their control, and what time can do to that love. I wanted to tell people the story of a love that transcends politics but is destroyed by time. When directing this play, I wanted to evoke these complex feelings, and capture that Russian quality that defines it and makes it so gut-wrenching.

This play also gives a sense of humanity, as it strives for something greater than it can ever be. I wanted to offer it to anyone and everyone who has loved and lost in an effort to recognize the tragedy of our own failures, but not to discredit the value of love. The characters in *A Warsaw Melody* love each other, but they find that loving in the midst of their respective circumstances is unsustainable. Our lives are filled with choices, and no matter what we do,

something breaks. More often than not, we do not know how to put the pieces back together. The choices that Helya and Victor make are part of what makes this story so characteristically Russian. In my mind, the forefront of this story needed to be the humanity of the characters. When trying to capture these elements, I turned to music. Love and music are two arguably uniquely human qualities that define so much of our lives. *A Warsaw Melody* is thus a memory play of sorts, evoking a type of poignancy, and nostalgia that only a familiar song can accomplish. I wanted to use music as the thread that ties the story together.

The story of *A Warsaw Melody* exists within a very clear context of political turmoil. The action begins immediately post World War 2, in the midst of the Soviet Union. *A Warsaw Melody* begins in the winter of 1946 and runs into spring of '47, occurring during the reign of the Soviet Union (1922-1991) and ending in 1967, years after Stalin's death in 1953. Poland was a Soviet satellite state, and was never fully a member of the Soviet Union. Germany occupied Poland from 1939 to 1945 when World War II ended. However, in 1944, Warsaw attempted an uprising, and the ensuing battle devastated the city. Despite pleas for assistance to their allies in Russia, no Soviet assistance was given, leading to accusations that Stalin allowed the Polish resistance to be crushed¹. Betrayal and distrust characterize the relationship between the two states, and their animosity continues into the present day. There is certainly a nationalistic element in the play, given that Helya and Victor represent their respective countries. Looking at them as stand-ins for Russia and Poland, we gain new insights into their relationship. Victor

¹ Włodzimierz Borodziej and Barbara Harshav, *The Warsaw Uprising of 1944*, 90

espouses Soviet ideals constantly, while Helya's war-torn past leads her to lean on her foreignness as a ploy.

Given that Helya is from Warsaw, firsthand memories of the war are immediate to her. Poland and Russia have a contentious history, the resentment and hurt that the Poles hold for the Russian colors Helya's love for Victor. The turning point of the play revolves around Stalin passing a law forbidding marriage to foreigners in 1947. This law was enacted on February 15th and served multiple functions. It acted as a declaration of Soviet nationalism and also as a means of keeping Soviet citizens inside the country.² Not only did the law ban marriage to foreigners, it also annulled previous marital contracts between Soviet citizens and foreigners. This proves to be tragic for Helya and Victor, who are at an impasse when the law is enacted. Seeing no solution, they part, ending Part I of the play. Helya and Victor's relationship is torn apart by something beyond their control but by a power that to Helya, Victor represents. The law comes from the Russian government, to Helya Victor is a symbol of that regime. Although Stalin's ruling is outside of their control, the choice to separate and pursue their own paths away from one another is made with their own agency. They make a choice between love and duty, a decision that runs throughout the play, and are constantly trying to determine if they have made the right one.

Part II begins in Warsaw Poland in 1957. At this point historically, Stalin has died. In the play, Helya is an established singer in Poland by this point, and Victor is a successful wine maker. Both have followed their dreams and find themselves once again in the same place. The next time they meet is in 1967, and another ten years have passed. The timeline of these

² Runyan, *Psychology and Historical Interpretation*, 70

characters covers most of the latter half of the Soviet Union, during social and political uprisings of all forms. In a society like the Soviet Union, which was characterized by strict sanctions and scarcity, the cultural implications of these events would have greatly affected the lives of these characters. The love between Helya and Victor that blossoms in these conditions represents the Russian soul that cannot be stifled. The soul of life and culture in Russia despite its tumultuous history is a metaphor for the passion that so powerfully embodies and runs just under the surface of Russian drama.

Having an understanding of Russian culture can help gain perspective on these works. As I mentioned earlier, there are several words in Russian that cannot be translated into English. For example, “душа” (soul), “тоска” (melancholy/sadness), and “судьба” (fate). Meaning-wise, these are more than just words, and serve as integral concepts in Russian culture. For the purposes of *A Warsaw Melody*, I was particularly interested in the concept of “судьба,” which we translate roughly as ‘fate’. The belief in fate is pervasive in Russian culture. It is believed that someone’s fate or life path is determined when they are born. Both Polish and Russian cultures have this concept of predestined paths³. The person in question, however, does not know their fate. I also stated earlier that Russian drama is more tragic because of the characters’ sense of free will. Keeping this cultural context in mind, the question is: is it more tragic for characters to be aware of their fates and fail in attempting to escape them (like in classic Greek and other western tragedies)? Or is it more tragic when characters believe they have agency and instead make choices that result in the fall? This latter apparent sense of agency speaks to the human condition in a more visceral way. The power of Russian theatre and its tradition of both

³ Sedakova, *The Notion of Fate (Russian судьба) in Slavonic Folk Tradition: An Ethnolinguistic Approach*, 4-7.

naturalism and realism is the direct link to the lives of the audience. The action on and off the stage are equally human experiences.

To encapsulate this slow-burn effect that is so characteristic of Russian drama, I had to identify the moments in the story that could most powerfully imbue that feeling in the audience. Doing this called for an exploration of Russian theatre technique. Russian theatre tradition differs from American theatre in several key ways. Although American theatre is rooted in the teachings of pioneers of Russian theatre technique, like Constantin Stanislavsky, it is a vastly different style. Russian theatre education is built around the concept of an ensemble. Students work with a core group of classmates to create work. The professional theatre scene is more collaborative than American theatre which is so often focused on a commercial outcome. In a Russian theatre ensemble, each person plays an integral role in the organism of the group that creates the work. Russian theatre focuses on the process of creating and storytelling rather than rushing to achieve a result. The foundation of this type of training is etude work. Etudes are essentially the structure of a story; they consist of characters existing given circumstances then an event occurs which changes the scene and the character's behaviors.

During my study abroad experience in Russia, we worked with etudes daily. I tried to keep in mind this concept of an event when distinguishing them in my text analysis. Because *A Warsaw Melody* is about two characters, the construction of their relationship was critical. I needed to build the relationship so that the tragic outcome was 'earned.' However, even an 'earned' tragic ending provides no satisfaction. In fact, if executed correctly, the audience longs for satisfaction and is denied it. The characters never quite end up together as much as the audience yearns for them to. The end is tragic not only in its outcome but in its lack of climax.

Instead, the characters are pulled apart slowly and painfully by the forces of time rather than any one cathartic moment.

Below, I have included a breakdown of the scenes, with my working titles for each, paying special attention to the etude structure, while also interpreting information that I felt contributed to the development of Helya and Victor's relationship. My process for text analysis and scene work focused on discovering the steps in that relationship that earn and justify the magnitude and significance of events of the play. I began by breaking down the script into smaller recognizable chunks. The construction of this play is a series of vignettes, so that breakdown was essentially already done for me. Within each scene, I then identified the main event, adhering to the focus on etudes in Russian theatre training. The next step was to further dissect each scene by analyzing the 'beats' within them. I broke up the beats depending on when I felt there was a shift in Helya and Victor's relationship and when something changed for each of them. In each beat, I identified possible actions for each character and notable dynamics that shifted or were at play in those moments. In tablework, we focused on sculpting the relationship, reading over the script beat by beat. Both actors were onstage essentially the whole show, so the challenge for us was to create clear but subtle differentiations between scenes. When reading, we identified what the actors were trying to achieve, while keeping an eye on context so that each beat felt connected to them.

Scene Breakdown:

Conservatory:

In the first scene of *A Warsaw Melody*, Victor and Helya meet for the first time. Helya is a student at a Conservatory in Moscow. In this scene, she is attending a concert presumably with her friend, Asya, who unbeknownst to Helya has sold her ticket to Victor. Victor sits next to Helya and starts a conversation. The main event of this interaction in my eyes is their meeting, representing the transition from stranger to something more. When approaching this moment, it is important to note the way that the given circumstances of the characters affect their behavior. Being in a situation with structured codes of behavior, like in a concert hall, informs and restricts interactions between people. The added urgency of the impending start of the concert also colors the conversation between Helya and Victor. Initially, we observe Helya's reluctance to talk to Victor. Culturally and metaphorically-speaking, this can be interpreted as denying Victor the right to encroach upon her 'territory.'

In scene work, we explored this idea of permission and access. Being aware of the steps that lead to Helya's transition from resentment to an interest in pursuing a relationship with Victor is key. The question on our minds was: when does the breach of formality begin that allows for further intimacy?

Zorin introduces themes in this first scene that reappear throughout the play. Discussions of love versus duty are first explored in the opening scene. Helya describes two of her friends who choose different paths in life, one chooses love and the other her career. The dichotomy of love and duty reappears throughout the play, as the characters are faced with choices between following their love for each other and individually pursuing career success. All throughout, they re-examine what happiness is through this lens, and whether they make the right choice.

Walk Home:

Helya and Victor achieve a new level of their relationship when they agree to meet again during the walk home from the concert together. Helya and Victor both confess their interest in one another, thereby engaging in mutual vulnerability. The challenge of this scene (as with the other street scenes) is creating a concrete environment in an abstract space. Physical life for the actors was a useful tool to accessing that specificity and making the world feel real. Business with hats and coats and collaborative visualization of what the street looks and feels like helped ground the actors, allowing them to more fully embody their characters.

Additionally, power dynamics of flirting dictate much of this scene. We also played with spatial dynamics to build a sense of urgency. We chose where in the space the door to Helya's dorm is, every time she approaches that door the stakes are raised as Victor tries to keep her with him. Helya is aware of this and can use it to her advantage. In their relationship, Helya holds a lot of power; however, the way she wields that power is not always what is expected. Helya is an outsider to Soviet Russia, and she is aware of it. She weaponizes her foreignness as a means of advancing herself in social situations. With Victor, she steers the relationship in the direction she wants by suggesting to him how he should take charge.

First Date:

Helya maintains the upper hand in her relationship with Victor through banter. However seemingly aloof she is, she is actually just as invested in the relationship as Victor is. A power shift occurs in this scene when Victor discovers that Helya has prepared for their meeting by reading Khayyam (a philosopher whom Victor quotes). Helya has unintentionally shown her

hand, and when Victor calls her out on it, she responds defensively trying to reclaim her ground. This moment emphasizes a key personality difference between the two characters—while Victor is open from the start, Helya puts up a front. In terms of building tension, we found several moments where Helya and Victor almost kiss or touch only to withdraw. People become invested in the lives of characters when they recognize the humanity of the characters, these moments of recognition can come from little moments of awkwardness like chinks in armor. Although the war informs their lives in many ways within their relationship, there is peace and safety in their love. It transcends war and politics, but also feels raw and real.

Warsaw Booth 6:

At this scene in *A Warsaw Melody*, taking place in an international call office in Moscow, the relationship between Helya and Victor has developed to the point where jealousy comes into play. Helya plays with this dynamic by intentionally not telling Victor who she has called on the phone. This scene also holds the first moments of direct physical intimacy. For instance, a particularly climactic moment in the play occurs when Victor declares that “The Gentleman is on his knees”, revealing his outright commitment to Helya . In response, Helya says that he ‘looks’ like the expression, “Slave free or gentlemen on his knees”⁴. I investigated this situation and found that the original text translates more directly to, “Master or lost”. I liked the sentiment of the English translation, although it has a slightly different meaning. Regardless, what both translations have in common is Victor’s total surrender to his love for Helya. I wanted to

⁴ Zorin, *A Warsaw Melody*, 274

highlight this moment. I did so by punctuating it with breath on both sides and blocking Victor in a strong position onstage.

Museum:

By this point in the play, Helya and Victor's relationship has further developed to the point of reaching a level of comfortability and physical intimacy with each other. Helya tells Victor stories about her life, showing that she wants to be completely vulnerable with him. Through this newfound vulnerability, Victor's notions of Russian masculinity become more apparent, especially when the two characters discuss what "strength" means to each.

Independence and strength is important to Victor. He values the ability to be self-sufficient and renounces the need to rely on others. To Helya, strength is a symbol of Fascism— of the war that she encountered first-hand. Therefore, peace is more important to Helya. Ironically, talk of war is prevalent in this scene, despite their resolution to speak only of peace. Victor always thinks of something for them to do together. This dynamic is first established in the Museum. Helya likes this about their relationship.

New Years Part I:

The major event in this scene is Helya and Victor's acknowledgement that they have fallen in love with each other. Helya takes it upon herself to uphold Polish traditions. It is important to her to be strong and visible. Helya wants to be the most beautiful woman at the new year's party, she wants to stand out. She represents Poland now more than ever. Victor and Helya discuss the quality of a bottle of wine that they are drinking. When they talk about wine,

they are talking about themselves. The bouquet mentioned is their relationship. This scene reveals a lot about the characters. Despite her confidence in many situations, Helya is deeply insecure. Victor and Helya share a tender moment when Victor puts the shoes on her feet. This simple gesture shows Helya that he reveres her. We get to look further into Helya's mind in this scene. Helya is overwhelmed by sadness during a moment between her and Victor when they dance. She is sad because she recognizes the temporality of beautiful moments such as these. To her, it is terrifying that they almost didn't meet, and she cannot fathom a world in which their lives failed to collide.

New Years Part II:

I split this scene into two pieces, because it felt as though two major events transpire in this segment, separated by the period during which Victor falls asleep. The major event in this scene so far (and perhaps the play altogether) is the proposal. Helya and Victor's whole relationship has built up to Victor's proposal to Helya. Helya's initial and deeply rooted fear of change causes her to push away the idea of getting married. Initially, we almost bought into Victor's feelings of rejection. But, we established that Victor actually sees this as an opportunity to explain himself and fight for the woman he loves.

Think of Something:

This segment is when Helya and Victor are torn apart. Stalin passes a law banning marriage to foreigners, leaving the characters romantically doomed. In order to cope with their devastating situation, both characters direct blame and frustration at each other. While Helya is aggressively aware of the implications of Stalin's ruling, Victor does not see the connection

between the law and their love, firmly believing that their love makes them impervious to any external force. Victor frequently acts as a voice of the Soviet regime, and that regime is what is tearing them apart to Helya in this moment he is responsible.

I experienced challenges while coaching the acting in this scene. It needed to be a culmination of action. Up until this moment in *A Warsaw Melody*, the relationship between the two characters was building. I wanted this moment to be catastrophic, and furthermore, to have earned that catastrophic nature. To accomplish this, I worked with the actors on instilling dramatic irony. Although they knew what would happen next, the audience still needs to witness a story arc that slowly unfolds as the play progresses. I also did not want the actors to leap to a place of artificiality and histrionic performance, just because they know the stakes of the situation. I worked particularly with Casey (Helya), who I found was pushing for emotion rather than playing the action of the scene. We worked together to ‘earn’ moments and take our time arriving there. Being aware of breath and pacing helped, as well as being mindful of the given circumstances and actions of the scenes.

PART II:

It's Me Part I :

The phone call that opens this scene is the first contact that Helya and Victor have had with each other in ten years. What I kept in mind was the question, *what does it mean to hear that person's voice after so long?* Although it is a short scene, and the two characters do not interact physically, there is a lot of room for discovery for the actors. Victor has to make the decision to call Helya, and he also has to be appropriately affected by the male voice that first answers on the other end of the line (Helya's husband). Both Helya and Victor need to go

through the steps of realizing the significance of who was on the other end of the phone and how much romantic longing and tension exists in this moment. They then needed to make a decision regarding how to proceed knowing these feelings. I wanted the actors to play with the process of experiencing that emotional turmoil.

It's Me Part II:

The initial interaction between Helya and Victor in this scene mirrors that of their first date. In this sequence of the play, the two characters physically meet for the first time in ten years. As a result, they must navigate the awkwardness and complexities of this reunion. Both Helya and Victor attempt to ascertain how the other feels and subsequently decide how to behave. Their dynamic is strikingly different now. One way in which their relationship differs is conveyed through Helya's attitude toward her foreignness. She is in her home country now; in other words, this is her territory, making Victor the outsider. In a way, Victor's presence is what makes Helya an outsider, she has to speak to him in Russian. Victor tries anyway and calls on memories from their past. Helya alludes to Victor's role of the person who is always thinking of things for them to do, and she instead decides to play the host. By Helya assuming this role, the character dynamic switches. However, the past romantic tension still lingers in the present—both veil acknowledgements of their feelings for each other. Victor, in his admiration for Poland and Warsaw, is subtly expressing his admiration for Helya. Helya knows this on some level, but pretends not to. In the final moment of this scene, Helya asks Victor if it really is him. He responds, "It is Helya, it's me."⁵ This simple reply provides a moment of transparency and

⁵ Zorin, *A Warsaw Melody*, 288

functions as a touchstone for both characters to acknowledge that they are together physically and emotionally again.

Restaurant:

Helya and Victor ‘rediscover’ each other throughout the course of their conversation in the restaurant. In fact, this scene is all about rediscovery. Victor and Helya discuss Helya’s friends and the divergent paths that the two characters took in life, with one choosing love and the other choosing duty. Helya wants to know what the right choice is and fears she has made the wrong one. Although both characters find that their feelings for each other are still there, they must trade confessions of their spouses. Helya then sings, and the familiar melody is back. It recalls the times of Helya and Victor’s love, and the music thus becomes a confession of love itself. In this moment, Victor truly realizes that he still loves Helya. Helya, thinking similarly, goes on to confess her feelings for Victor. He does not know how to respond, saying only, “What can I say? What?”⁶. Victor’s helplessness represents a classic device of Russian drama— what is unsaid holds the weight of the scene. This particular moment reminds me of a scene in Act 4 of *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov, between Irina and Tuysenbach they are engaged to be married although she claims she does not love him, this is the last scene before he is killed in a duel against a rival for her hand. He wants her to say she loves him and she cannot⁷. This scene speaks to the Chekhovian style of Zorin’s play.

⁶ Zorin, *A Warsaw Melody*, 291

⁷ Chekhov, *Three Sisters*, 299

Bouquet Matured:

Here, in *A Warsaw Melody*, is another street scene where another goodbye occurs. Helya and Victor share a kiss, representing an emotional moment of honesty between them.. Helya begs Victor to go with her, but he resists out of duty to his commitments. Again, the dichotomy of love and duty dominates their lives. But as Helya is walking away, he calls her back, needing her to know that his refusal is not because he doesn't love her. The two characters part ways, again missing the moment when they could find each other.

Concert:

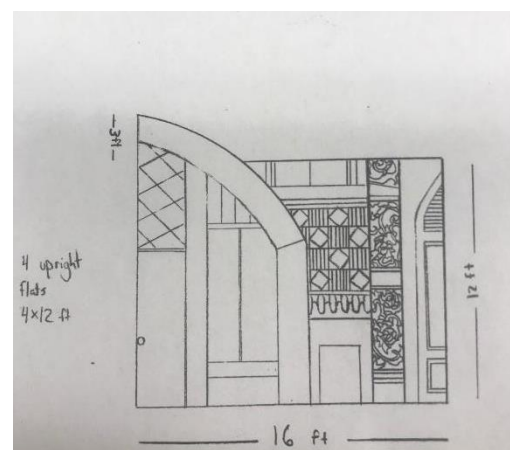
The play undergoes many emotional shifts and transformations, which are essential to its humanizing impact. Another ten years have passed, and Helya and Victor are back in Moscow. Victor surprises Helya in the dressing room of her concert during intermission. Again, the two characters are in the throes of discovering the status of their current relationship. However, Helya is distracted and claims to not have noticed Victor in the audience. This lack of awareness of Victor's presence betrays a major emotional shift for Helya, given that she previously always sought him out in the audience. This is a signal that she has ultimately moved on from their past romance in some form.

Over the course of the scene, both characters reveal that they are not married anymore. An important dynamic between the now former couple throughout the play is Victor's correcting of Helya's Russian. Her mistakes are endearing to Victor. Victor claims that without her mistakes, it would not recognize her. However, in this final conversation, Helya makes no language error. Meaning that Victor is no longer able to recognize the person he once loved.

There is something incredibly tragic about the goodbye in this scene, because it is finally possible for the characters to be together. But yet again, they have chosen not to follow that path—Victor will not visit Helya, and time has officially taken its last toll. This is the primary difference between Russian tragedy and Greek tragedy. In the former, the people create the ‘fall’ while in the latter it is laid upon them. Considering the idea of fate as an entity is cause to wonder whether or not Helya and Victor’s paths in life were in opposition or in accordance to their fate. Perhaps they were meant to be together all along and never manifested it. *A Warsaw Melody* leaves Helya and Victor with a sense of peace and acceptance but a longing for what could have been.

This is not naturalism. Since this play is written episodically, leaning heavily on mood, creating that mood was integral to the design process. Using lights, sound, and costumes we wanted to create a world in which these characters ‘live’ in their memories for each other. This is a period piece, so being truthful to the time in which it is set is important. The reign of the Soviet Union is a particularly striking era of history. It is a juxtaposition in itself, containing both excess and deprivation.

Designing the set was an extensive process. My set designer and I meticulously discussed how to best use the stage space. We wanted to have a set that could represent many different environments. Playing with abstract ideas, of a collage type backdrop, or the possibility of using projections, we ultimately landed on the idea to build a wall. This wall would serve the dual purpose of evoking an



Eastern European style while simultaneously being able to be lit differently according to an ‘inside’ versus ‘outside’ environment. Katie Homer-Drummond, who designed the set and costumes, looked through books of Eastern European architecture to find inspiration for a versatile design. We had to contend with budget limitations, but ultimately landed on something we could both be happy with. One thing that I observed during my time in Moscow was the pastel colors of the buildings. These colors were striking in their vibrancy, a quality that differs so much from cities in the United States. Katie used this characteristic to inform our color choices for the play. She designed the color of the paint on the set to look like sunlight on snow, creating an expressive color palate.



We also were fortunate enough to get our hands on a streetlamp. The streetlamp was an important symbol in this performance, both grounding the street scenes in space, while also symbolizing the crossroads at which the characters frequently find themselves.

This piece is heavily mood-driven. As I previously stated, this is not a naturalistic play. Instead, it is highly cinematic, with elements of a memory play. What better way to create a mood than lighting? One visual image that I was particularly drawn to was the idea of having small hanging lights decorate the stage. Russian theatre is highly experimental particularly in comparison to American theatre. Directors are free with forms and images that tell the story beyond concrete representation. In a production of *Drums in the Night* at the Pushkin theatre in Moscow, a plethora of lit orbs descended upon the stage. It was an incredibly beautiful and

moving image. Therefore, I felt inspired to capture some element of the spirit of spectacle in Russian drama by emulating that. I was drawn particularly to the lights, because they also represented stars. This aesthetic decision worked well with *A Warsaw Melody's* themes of star-crossed lovers and fate. Furthermore, I wanted to play with the lights as a symbol of the characters being a part of something bigger and something they are at the mercy of. Notably, these hanging lights were the last thing illuminated on the stage at the end of the play.



Since there are so many scenes in this play, crafting transitions was a crucial part of the design process. My lighting designer Josh Turner and I used the hanging lights as well as some lower and colored lighting to connect the scenes. I asked my lighting designer to look at winter colors, sticking to cool blues, whites, and some yellows, reminiscent of streetlamps cutting through the snow. I assembled pictures online to act as inspiration for designing the environments in the show. Due to the transitions, we had minimal set pieces in the show. Therefore, it was very important that we distinguished each setting using lights.



The looks we programmed initially were too washed out and lacked both depth and texture. With too many lights on, the specific details of

the scene setting were unclear. My lighting designer, and I stayed one night after tech and reprogrammed the entire show. We played with the direction of light, deciding that only the necessary territories that the actors used in the scene should be lit. Adding more of an aesthetic ‘atmosphere’ made the spaces feel more real. The development of the museum scene is a good example of this revision. Initially it was just a white wash, but Josh had the idea to use the specials that we had built into the plot to light specific areas of the stage and to blend that light a little like exhibits in a museum. It created a much more dynamic scene.

I isolated moments in the script when I wanted to use specials. We developed hard spots in each of the four corners and center of the stage. I used these spots for Victor’s monologues which denote the passage of time. Positioning the characters in these spots at certain moments in the play added visual significance to them.



We experienced technical difficulties with lighting. During our final dress rehearsal and our opening night, the light board in the Kander Theatre (where the show took place) turned off in the middle of the performance, making it impossible for our light cues to happen. This caused me and our production team a great deal of stress. We ended up devising a contingency plan. I blocked an alternate ending to the show since we had previously ended the show with a light cue. Fortunately, we were able to reprogram all the cues onto a different device, allowing all the other light cues in other shows to go as planned. We were very grateful for this, given that the lights added immeasurably to the ‘atmosphere’ of the show. This technical setback made me even more

appreciative of how solid the rest of the show was. The most important aspect of the performance was the story between Helya and Victor , which remained intact, even if it did not look exactly as we had planned. The actors carried the show well and did well telling the story, regardless of what was going on around them. I learned about how to handle setbacks like this and was gratified to see how well the whole team rose to this challenge.

A Warsaw Melody covers several decades in only 90 minutes. We wanted to make the

costumes period-appropriate, while also fitting into

our budget. We decided to give both characters a

standard look. For Connor, it was a suit throughout the whole play, since men’s fashion did not change

much in the periods we were considering. However,

he did change ties to denote time change. For Casey, we had to consider that her character

required a lot of costume changes. Therefore, we had

to strategize how to make those efficient and doable.

Katie (who also designed costumes) and I made

several trips to thrift stores in the area with the goal

of finding pieces that could be period appropriate.

For Helya’s basic look, we chose a dress with a silhouette reminiscent of styles of the ‘40s, but

one that could still be appropriate in other periods.

Trying to find a through-line of color was a focus for

us as well. We landed on purple and navy for

Casey’s basic costume which was reflected in the set.



She also had several green garments. Coats and winter accessories were important considering the fact that we were working with a wintery Eastern European setting. Yet, not all fashion decisions were determined by us—the script specified certain pieces. For example, when the couple exchanges gifts, Victor gives Helya shoes and Helya gives him a tie. We thus spent time searching for the ‘right’ shoes and a tie to match. For the second part, Victor’s tie is red to symbolize his Soviet ideologies. We gave Helya victory rolls, a hairstyle popular for women in post-war Europe. In contrast to Helya’s frills, Connor simply had a short haircut and a mustache. The costumes lent a great deal of personality to the actors and helped them immerse themselves in their characters more. But period pieces have a way of doing that, since the clothes you wear speaks to the environment and kind of person you are.

The show itself is named after a song. Music is therefore the fabric of the play. I wanted it to run through and tie together all of the pieces. Zorin qualifies the title by calling this play “A Lyrical Drama in Two Parts”⁸ alluding to the lyricism that takes this play out of the naturalistic realm and speaks to the importance of music in it. Music is visceral, and it can instantly take us back to a time or a place. It can make us feel something so deeply and so suddenly. To me, the “Warsaw Melody” is a song that intensely moves Helya and Victor, while their relationship functions as the ebbing and flowing melody. In many ways, this is a memory play, and I wanted the music to set the tone and attitude for the memory captured by this story. Marlena Gonzales, a TIMARA student at the Oberlin Conservatory, designed the sound for this play. Together, we worked on establishing what the ‘goal’ of the music in the play should be. There are many transitions in *A Warsaw Melody*, so we used the music to drive those transitions and meld the

⁸ Zorin, *A Warsaw Melody*

narrative together into a fluid and cohesive storyline. For each transition, I recorded how long I expected we would need to change the set, as well as the mood for the coming scene. From these decisions, Marly was able to compose appropriate and mood-fitting transition music.

Music is also very important to the characters' individual stories in the play. For example, Helya studies voice in a conservatory in Moscow. Helya and Victor meet at a concert in that same conservatory where a Chopin Mazurka is being performed. Chopin is a Polish composer, and his introduction into the story speaks to the importance of Helya's heritage. We used Chopin in many of the transitions as well. Marly reworked one of Chopin's pieces to create the "Melody". It was hauntingly beautiful and somehow spoke to my own feelings of what Russian (or Eastern European) music is. The only lyrics that we used were those mentioned in the script, "Straszne cię kocham," which means "I love you a lot" in Polish. It is a simple song, but everything I could have hoped for.

Throughout the play, Helya and Victor do not outwardly tell each other that they love each other. We identified the moments when they communicate their love without words. Music served to bridge this communicative gap by expressing the inexpressible and turning restrained emotion into romance. Love and music are two uniquely human things and are nearly inextricable. As a result, centering *A Warsaw Melody* on music invites a celebration of humanity with all its pains, joy, sadness, and love. This framework also gives the play its memory-like quality— even though Helya and Victor keep missing their chances to be together, their past love story continuously 'returns' whenever they hear this song. The "Warsaw Melody" is the medium through which Helya tells Victor that she loves him. With the cultural backdrop of the

Soviet Union of which censorship was a tenant of the regimes at the time, the dynamic between the spoken and unspoken is particularly fascinating. I wanted to use that element as the entry point into the tragic story between the two characters and as a representation of the beautiful and painful pieces of them that make them human.

Although there are only two characters in the play, there are several instances of offstage voices in the script. I chose to have those recordings be in the native language they were originally in. The voice in the call office in Moscow was recorded in Russian, while the phone call and voice of Julek Stadtler (both in Warsaw) were in Polish. We also added ambient sounds, particularly in street scenes to ground the characters in their environments. These additions were made in an attempt to remind the audience of the context of the play and the world in which it was situated.

In Russian, “судьба” means “fate”, which is an ingrained concept in that culture. *A Warsaw Melody* takes a close look at fate. So often in Russian stories, fate comes from the choices that you make. The tragedy here is not tragic in the Greek sense of unavoidable catastrophe that the hero struggles to defy. Instead, it is the more human predicament of the choices you do make that still do not save you. It is incredibly frustrating. Paradoxes such as these are what Russian tragedies are made of—the inertia of human beings paralyzed by choice and not knowing what will happen next. Stories like these are more potent because they are familiar to us. We see ourselves struggle to put the pieces together, and we see ourselves ‘losing.’ Love stories about missed timing, like *A Warsaw Melody*, infuriate me. These stories are perfect and painful and universal in their imperfection.

Something that I love about theatre is how it presents a cross-section of life. Theatre takes all of the things that are broken about being human and shows us the inherent beauty in them. That brokenness is the beautiful thing about us, and that is what this story is all about. On the surface, *A Warsaw Melody* is about the love shared between two star-crossed characters. But love is so much more than a mutual sensation—it is also the best and most terrible thing about being human. Our ability to love is what makes us who we are. It is what tears things apart, is torn apart itself, and causes humans to lose themselves in it. In other words, to love is to be human, and although love can lead to tragedy, it can also lead to beautiful stories and experiences. For instance, Helya and Victor love so deeply and there is something magical about that. But alas, time steamrolls on, and the two characters are at its mercy.

As I mentioned earlier, music is another uniquely human thing. In this play, Helya and Victor are not only connected to each other, but to the audience as well. All of us (and any human being who has ever loved) has the power or the vulnerability to listen to music and feel it rushing back. For the characters in this play, the melody recalls another time before life took over. *A Warsaw Melody* is about this nostalgic rush and pervasive “what if?” I have learned so much from this project—about myself as an artist, as a student, and as a person. I hope that the audiences who saw this production left with similar feelings on some level or other. We are all striving to be, make, and do our best in this world, even when circumstances are unfavorable. Through it all, we continue to love (although we don’t always know how), and that is the most beautiful and terribly tragic thing about us. ‘Life’ doesn’t happen in one culminating cathartic

moment, but in bits and pieces, Despite everything, it is certainly worth it as long as we are able to say that, “no matter what, we didn’t stand still.”⁹



Конец

⁹ Zorin, *A Warsaw Melody*, 296

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