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14TH ANNUAL ONE ACT PLAY FESTIVAL
SUBMISSION DEADLINE JANUARY 20 2012 5PM
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the ur international theatre program

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Boytchev's play abounds with metaphors. It finds its humor in the political analogies it draws between the abandoned mental patients and the political environment of his time. But one of the main motifs, the "line," is neither a political nor social statement. The physical line of soldiers, and the spiritual line Colonel Fetisov equates it to, is both a mental and emotional symbol for the ambiguous border between sanity and insanity, reality and unreality, truth and falsehood. It is an unknown territory, a space in limbo, not unlike that of the asylum itself (which Fetisov claims to be a separate territory of the UN). Its borders are no more stable than two overturned bedframes, and the points at which the line breaks down during the play are turning points in which the entire structure behind the story threatens to collapse.

Similar to the line, the "game" mentioned by the Doctor is another one of Boytchev's comments on society, but with a sociopolitical twist. The Doctor draws a parallel between the rules of a game and the social norms of society; but in the play's asylum, the game has no rules. The awakening of the Colonel is what brings rules to the game, but not the same ones that the rest of the world lives by. This is what creates the conflict. It is the metaphor of the game that reduces normal, "sane" society to just a different set of laws from those that the "insane" live by. The fact that it is the supposedly sane character, the Doctor, who stumbles upon this metaphor, makes it all the more disturbing. In introducing the game, Boytchev asks the audience to engage in it and to decide which side of that line they fall on.

But that would have ruined the game with all its rules that my patients had invented, a game that ensured that they all lived the lives of normal people […] And when all is said and done who can say which game is the real one? Is it their little game or the great one that we all play, all of us that they call the normal ones.

The game, by hristo boytchev
translated by judith sprostovanova

production staff

production stage manager .............................................................. nina desoi
assistant production stage manager ................................................ liza penney
stage managers ............................................................................ wellington german/run crew
........................................................................................................ william hogan/sound
........................................................................................................ penina rubin/costumes
........................................................................................................ natasha sacoto/lights
master electrician ........................................................................ cassandra donatelli
assistant master electrician ............................................................. roby blunt
audiovisual engineer ..................................................................... kevin brice
scenic artists ................................................................................. carlotta gambato, macie mccowan & apollo mark weaver
scenic painting assistants .............................................................. jessica chinelli, lydia jimenez, nina desoi
franny swanson & david knrick
assistant makeup designer ............................................................. mark romano
additional production support ....................................................... jeff englander & mark romano
assistant director .......................................................................... meridel phillips

The Colonel Bird runs approximately 1 hour and 40 minutes without intermission

special thanks

Applied Audio and Theatre Supply - Linda Taylor - Lynne Spahn - Adam Ginsberg - Darcy Bird
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Hristo Boytchev did not grow up intending to become one of Bulgaria’s leading playwrights. Born on March 5, 1950 in northern Bulgaria, he originally planned to study mechanical engineering. After his graduation in 1974, he worked for ten and a half years at a manufacturing plant, first as a factory worker and eventually as a manager. But after his first play, That Thing; premiered in 1984, he quit his job at the factory to work full-time as a playwright.

By 1995 to 1999, Boytchev studied drama at the National Academy for Theatrical and Film Art in Sofia. By the time he left the Academy, his plays were being produced throughout Bulgaria, including not only That Thing, but also several new plays he wrote while attending the Academy. The next year, the first film based on That Thing premiered in Bulgaria.

The basic ideas behind The Colonel Bird did not germinate until Boytchev began his stint in politics before and during the 1996 Bulgarian presidential elections. Beginning shortly after his graduation from the National Academy, Boytchev began appearing on one of Bulgaria’s more well-known political television channels as a political satirist. By 1996, he was the writer and host of his own TV show, and had begun a campaign for the presidency. He chose to use all of his allotted television time for thirty successive days to mock the election through political satire. He subsequently won 2% of the vote (from a ballot of 15 candidates).

By that year, The Colonel Bird was quickly becoming Boytchev’s most widely recognized work. In 1998 and 1999, the play was produced in several theaters in Bulgaria, as well as in Austria, Macedonia, Great Britain and France. Based on Boytchev’s experiences in politics, and his frustration with the myopia of society, the play epitomized the political parody Boytchev had become famous for during the 1996 election. He also won a state subsidy to make a film version of the play in 1999.

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artist bios

Christopher Weare (Director) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Drama, University of Cape Town. He teaches acting for stage and screen, and directing for stage and television. Areas of specialization include contemporary theatre practice and crafting comedy in performance.

Christopher is a member of The Mechanics Collective, which has for the last four years staged highly successful professional repertory seasons and a summer season in Cape Town. Recent productions include Lovejoy’s Women, The Real Inspector Hound, Mephisto, Frank’n Stein, Decadence, The Zoo Story and Cowboy Mouth. His collaborative work with the comedian, Alan Committie, have established Committie as one of the most successful South African theatre brands in the past ten years. He has directed extensively in collaboration with South African playwrights throughout his career.

Weare is also Director of the Little Theatre and founder of The Intimate Theatre. The latter is his initiative to provide and to nurture a theatre space for young professional theatre practitioners. His collaborative staging of INUA with Jonshell for Baba Yaga Productions from Denmark is his most recent work to be performed internationally (in Bogata, Columbia). He has staged works in Canada, Denmark, Italy, the Czech Republic, and Romania.

He was born in Zimbabwe. He is married with a son and a daughter.

Arnulfo Maldonado (Set and Costume Designer). Recent work includes: Fun at the Fair in Pigs & Needles (Foundry Theatre), La Boheme (Anchorage Opera), Jomama Jones: Radiate (SoHo Rep), Medea (Centro Cultural PU, Lima, Peru), Orpheus in the Underworld (Central City Opera), The Pearl Project (Diverse City Theater), EST Marathon Play Series (EST), The Usher’s Ball (CAP 21), and La Finta Giardiniera (Peak Performances, Kasser Theatre). Previous UR International Theatre Productions: The Illusion, The Haunted Jennifer and Hello Again. Upcoming: Seven Homeless Mammoths Wander New England (Two River Theater), Don Quixote (San Francisco Ballet), and Tosca (Anchorage Opera). Additional work includes engagements with Playwrights Horizons, Westport Country Playhouse, Studio Arena, Santa Fe Opera, and L.A. Opera. He has exhibited at the Prague Quadrennial, the international exhibition of scenography and theatre architecture. Arnulfo is the recipient of the 2008 Princess Grace Theater Fellowship (Fabergé Theater Award) and a graduate of NYU Tisch Department of Design for Stage and Film.

Dans Sheehan (Lighting Designer) is originally from Australia and currently works as a lighting designer out of New York. Recent dance designs include work by David Dorfman, Jennifer Archibald, Karole Armitage, Troy Power, Kathleen Dyar & Dwight Rhoden. She has worked recently with theatre companies including Labyrinth (The Atmosphere of Memory), Elevator Repair Service (Sound & the Fury, The Select), Caborca (Pen Knife and Never as Happy), The Ohio (Hater), and The Intiman (Crime & Punishment). She has also worked on musicals Bedbugs!!! and Plague. MFA: NYU. www.danssheehan.com

Grace Elizabeth Interlichia (Actress) is originally from Australia and currently works as a lighting designer out of New York. Recent dance designs include work by David Dorfman, Jennifer Archibald, Karole Armitage, Troy Power, Kathleen Dyar & Dwight Rhoden. She has worked recently with theatre companies including Labyrinth (The Atmosphere of Memory), Elevator Repair Service (Sound & the Fury, The Select), Caborca (Pen Knife and Never as Happy), The Ohio (Hater), and The Intiman (Crime & Punishment). She has also worked on musicals Bedbugs!!! and Plague. MFA: NYU. www.danssheehan.com

The Atmosphere of Memory has been staged in Theatre Sofia in Sofia, Bulgaria.

cast

doctor ........................................................ress melissa martin
patient one .................................................. samay kapadia
fetisov ....................................................... stella kammel
nina ............................................................. jessica chinelli
peppa ........................................................... grace elizabeth interlichia
matei ............................................................. lydia jimenez
davud ........................................................... andrew spitzberg
kiro .............................................................. jacob goritski

Because only the birds and man can fly. The birds with their wings, man with his soul.

a note about this translation

The Colonel Bird has been translated into 13 languages and, indeed, several different English versions exist. Recently, Boytchev has also published a version of the play entitled The Colonel and the Birds, with an all-female cast (save for the Colonel). The female version has been staged in Theatre Sofia in Sofia, Bulgaria.

two beautiful eyes

by peio iavorov

Two beautiful eyes.
The soul of a child.

In two beautiful eyes.
Music. Light.

They neither ask nor promise anything.
My soul entreats you, child.

Misfortunes and passions

will tomorrow drape over them

the veil of sin and shame.

Will not be dropped over them.

Misfortunes and passions.

My soul entreats you, child.

My soul entreats you.

They neither ask nor promise anything.

Two beautiful eyes.
Music. Light.

In two beautiful eyes.
The soul of a child.

Because only the birds and man can fly. The birds with their wings, man with his soul.
On the 1st of January 1942, 26 nations pledged, with the “Declaration of the United Nations” in the Atlantic Charter, to come together and defeat the Axis Powers and end the Second World War. That declaration led to the official creation of the United Nations on October 24th, 1945, with the ratification of the Charter drawn up by 50 countries at the United Nations Conference in San Francisco earlier that year. Based on the League of Nations (created in 1919 at the end of WWI with the Treaty of Versailles), the goal of the UN has been to promote international cooperation, aid economic development, protect human rights, and enforce international law. The United Nations Security Council, one of the five main councils comprising the UN, organizes international peacekeeping missions and authorizes troops (known as the “Blue Berets” because of their blue helmets) under UN operational control. Since the UN has no independent army, however, in some cases, the missions are headed by regional institutions, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a military alliance comprised of mostly western European states formed in 1949. NATO’s intervention in the Bosnian War was known as “Operation Deny Flight” and included both monitoring and enforcing compliance with the no-fly zone over Bosnia-Herzegovina until more aggressive action was taken with the bombing of Serbian targets in “Operation Deliberate Force” just before the end of the war.

Although for most Western cultures, the admittance of women into the armed forces began officially in the 1970’s, only a few countries, such as Serbia, actually allowed women to participate in combat positions. More often, women have historically served in artillery rather than infantry roles. Almost all countries with women in military roles have included them in naval and air force positions. In the United Nations armed forces, women have also been allowed to serve as military peacekeepers since the 1970’s, but the push for more female participants in peacekeeping missions has increased dramatically in the past decade. Resolution 1325, passed by the United Nations Security Council in October 2000, emphasized the importance of having female peacekeepers in the force, especially in the areas where violence specifically against women has occurred. Women in the United Nations peacekeeping force are crucial in countries where women are discouraged from disclosing sexual details, because female victims are much more likely to accept help from fellow women. They also serve as role models for local women, who can learn about peacekeeping careers in the United Nations as well as reading, writing, driving, and other skills the peacekeepers might be able to teach them. In both the UN operations in South Africa and in the Bosnian War, women played crucial roles in interacting with locals and helping them recover from gender-based violence.

Folkloric figures such as Mother Courage have also impacted our sense of women in relation to war. Mother Courage is a character in Bertolt Brecht’s play, Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder (Mother Courage and her Children). In the play, which takes place during the Thirty Years’ War, Mother Courage attempts to make a profit from the war but in the process loses her children, reunites with them, and in the end watches them die. Throughout the play, Brecht, like Boytchev, makes political statements about war and its destruction of not only nations but also of human virtues and identities. Mother Courage, based originally on the writings of the German author Grimmelshausen, is a recurring figure in the literary tradition. Outside of Brecht’s play, she has also appeared as the basis for characters in contemporary pieces such as Urine-town’s Penelope and the protagonist in Lynn Nottage’s Ruined.

In Eastern Europe, few women were openly allowed to participate in combat during the Balkan Wars, but since the acceptance of women into the armed forces, many female volunteers and some female combatants participated in the Yugoslav and Bosnian wars. The idea of a female in a leadership position such as a Colonel would have been unlikely, but not unheard of in Bulgaria at the time.
God helps only those that are mad in this world. Because when He created the world He was mad too. And now He is in love with His mistake.

Colonel Fetisov, act II, scene 8

The evolution of the insane asylum was a process that closely followed the development of psychiatry as a science. The isolated treatment of patients with perceived mental problems dates back as far as fifth- and sixth-century Jerusalem. Throughout the Middle Ages most mentally ill patients lived in separation from society, usually in cells, towers or houses attached to regular hospitals or monasteries. As the symptoms of these patients were not well understood, and their various illnesses were often viewed as forms of divine punishment or religious retribution, they were rarely treated humanely, if given any treatment at all.

The move to improve the standards of treatment for mental patients, and to categorize psychiatric illnesses, was introduced by the superintendent of the Asylum de Bicêtre in Paris, Philippe Pinel. The development of therapeutic treatments, however, was largely the work of William Ellis and his family, who ran the Hanwell Asylum in Middlesex, England, founded in 1831. Ellis’s methods were mostly based on various physical therapies. These underwent massive reforms during the 1920s and 1930s with the advancements in neurology (the study of the brain). It was during this period that procedures such as shock therapy, electroconvulsive therapy, and certain types of surgery such as the prefrontal lobotomy were most widely used.

These procedures were gradually replaced with specific drugs used to treat mental illnesses, which were introduced in the 1950s and became the modern-day solution to psychiatric disorders. Again, the phenomenon began in France, with Pierre Deniker’s introduction of chlorpromazine for treating psychosis in 1950. The use of clinical drugs to treat psychiatric patients drastically reduced the number of patients in institutions, and reduced neurological surgery to a rare and treatment.

One of the most complex and least-understood fields of mental disorders is the group of illnesses labeled as schizophrenia. Characterized by the well-known symptoms of visual and auditory hallucinations, paranoia, delusions, and incoherent speech and thought patterns, the disease is also marked by defects in emotional and social capacities needed to function normally. Schizophrenic patients usually lack motivation and are often incapable of forming relationships or experiencing the sensation of pleasure. Scientists have identified both psychological and neurological pathways that maintain schizophrenia once it is identified. Research indicates that not only can emotional experiences or trauma influence the nature and regularity of the disorder, but schizophrenic patients have also been found to exhibit certain similar neural characteristics, such as the decreased size of the hippocampus, an area of the brain integral to memory functions. However, the neuropsychological map of schizophrenia is a very recent progression in our understanding of the physical manifestations of psychiatric illnesses, and it is far from complete.

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Throughout the twentieth century, the area of southeastern Europe covered by the Balkan Mountains has been plagued by civil wars and international conflicts. The First and Second Balkan Wars, which took place in 1912 and 1913, were the direct result of the countries of the Balkan League (Montenegro, Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia) declaring their independence from the Ottoman Empire. The wars were largely disputes over territory, since the members of the Balkan League were united mainly in their similar goals to expand. In October of 1912, the four states, led by Montenegro, declared war on the Ottomans after coming together around the subject of the division of land favoring Macedonia. Despite the size of the Ottoman army, the strategic attacks of the Balkan League countries gave them the lead over their adversaries, who were spread too thin to support the empire’s considerable military advantage. The defeat of the Ottomans became clear after Serbia and Montenegro captured the city of Shkodra, and the war ended with the Treaty of London in May of the same year.

The peace did not last long. Less than a month later, Bulgaria led an attack on its former allies, Greece and Serbia, in an unofficial war against the advantages the other two countries had taken from the First Balkan War. This prompted the Second Balkan War, in which Montenegro, along with Romania and Russia, intervened against Bulgaria. Greece began to initiate counter-attacks against Bulgaria, leading to a series of violent massacres of Greek troops by the Bulgarian army. After Romania declared war on Bulgaria and began advancing on Sofia, Bulgarian forces requested armistice, to which Greece acquiesced.

More recently, the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the early 1990s, which was destructive of many areas in the Balkan Mountains outside Bosnia, was just one of the many international conflicts following the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991. After the states of Serbia and Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia, the Socialist Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina attempted to do the same. Unlike Serbia and Croatia, however, Bosnia-Herzegovina had always been a multi-ethnic state, with political power divided to represent various ethnic groups. Upon declaring independence, the Serb representatives in Bosnian government boycotted the referendum and declared their own Serbian Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In an attempt to stop the country from descending into civil war, the European Economic Community (EEC) proposed the Lisbon Agreement, which would divide power among ethnic communities, with the disadvantage of dividing areas into ethnic districts. The Bosnian representative, Alija Izetbegovic, refused the agreement. This was immediately followed by an arms embargo placed on the area by the United Nations, which only worsened the situation as it favored the armies of Serbia and Croatia and the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA). In March of 1992, the JNA attacked Bosnia-Herzegovina, supported by the Serbian government and Bosnian-Serb forces, which sparked violent conflicts across the country. The Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia became involved as a separate force in support of Bosnia-Herzegovina, although they had ulterior motives in gaining territory for Croatia. Although the Serb forces were after territory, the war quickly escalated into ethnic cleansing of Bosniaks by the Serbian army and JNA, who set up concentration camps throughout the areas they conquered for captured Bosniaks and Croats. Pressured by the Serbian government, the Croatian Defense Council (HVO) turned against Bosnia in an attempt to gain what little territory was left unconquered by the Serbs. The Croat-Bosnian war lasted until early 1993, when the United Nations Security Council became involved and enforced a no-fly zone over Bosnia-Herzegovina. Fighting continued, however, culminating in a massacre in Sarajevo, which prompted the United Nations to initiate a ceasefire between the HVO and the Bosnian army. The Washington Agreement in March of 1994, facilitated by the United States, established the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. But the Serbian forces, united under the name of the Army of the Republika Srpska (VRS), continued their attacks on Bosnia well into 1995. Combined efforts of NATO’s “Operation Deliberate Force” and international pressure on the Serbian government led to the Dayton Peace Accords between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia in November 1995.
How and when did you meet Hristo Boytchev, and what do you know about his inspiration for writing The Colonel Bird?

I met Hristo in 1997. It was only five years after the turmoil of the Balkan (Bosnian) wars. So it was a time when it was all pretty fresh, and Bulgaria was in upheaval. The play was written in response to that particular period. The emotional context was very strong, and the Bulgarians were still dealing with it. As for the experience when I met him – all I can say is that it was very emotional, because Bulgaria was still dealing with the joy, the joy of overcoming Russian domination, but they were also facing huge ethnic turmoil and the tragedy of the civil war. But I think what was interesting at the time when I met him was that it was only a few years after the end of apartheid in South Africa. So the resonances between Bulgaria and South Africa were extremely strong, and we shared a lot of thoughts about that. In South Africa it was a different kind of oppression, but application is oppression. It was just an interesting time. He was by nature a person who’s cynical about how major forces work, how large institutions operate, whether that’s the UN or whether it’s a peacekeeping force or a military force.

Why do you think The Colonel Bird is relevant to a modern audience, and in particular an American audience?

I think the play has universal themes, and that’s why it’s relevant to an American audience and to a universal audience. The themes are so rich. For me, the play is about power, isolation, loss of identity or possible loss of identity, and a world that has certain rules. And it questions which are the sane rules and which are the insane rules? I think when the question arises about whether you’re talking to an American audience or a South African audience, then you have to consider not only the play but also the treatment of it. With regard to South African audiences: in many ways South Africa is searching for an identity, a kind of utopia, whereas America is trying to retain an identity—you could say, to not lose that utopia. It’s been 15 years but South Africa is still coming out of isolation, still finding its place in the world. So in both respects, it’s almost as if we’re searching for the answer to the question: who’s the Colonel Bird that’s going to look after us? If I may make an analogy with South Africa: we had Nelson Mandela, and we were very lucky to have had him as our Colonel Bird who led our country through a very dangerous time (that’s not to say that the danger is over)! But who will lead America through this very dangerous time? So I think it’s a really interesting play in terms of its context, and even though it’s set in the Balkans, it certainly resonates across borders, across cultures, across languages.

What artistic choices did you make incorporating the culture of South Africa?

As a director, obviously, the play means something to you and you want to tell a story for a particular reason. But you also have to look at the environment in which you have to tell the story, and the environment is the society to whom you’re going to tell the story—in this case, an American audience and specifically a community of Americans who are located at a university. The next factor is that there is a physical space in which that story will be told—Todd Theatre. The space begins to talk to you in terms of how you’re going to tell the story. Meaning and environment start to talk to each other. And that nurtures a concept, and in this particular case, the shape of the physical theatre spoke to me about not dividing the actors and audience in a traditional way, but to try and put the two together, if you like. It’s nothing new, but I think it is pertinent to how we want to tell the story, so that we feel we can sit in the asylum. And at the moment, the asylum is the world, for me, not just this deserted monastery/clinik in the Balkan mountains. In theatrical terms, one would say that my approach is not realistic; it’s more abstract. Because of the different locations in the text, you have to go from a forest in the mountains to an asylum to battlefields to cathedral steps, etc. You have to find some kind of expressive medium that speaks to all those, and the abstract/realistic setting doesn’t make sense. Thus in terms of my conception there are aspects of realism, but that difference—i.e. the difference between what is real and what is abstract—resonates with the themes of the play. It’s like when you read a novel: a novelist has much more space and much more time to describe things in detail, and some novels really allow your imagination to take over. But often the spaces in a novel are so well described that your imagination doesn’t have to do that much. This is where the theatre is magic, because it leaves that space for us to imagine. So if I have to be somewhere in the mountains, well, we’re definitely not having mountain backdrops or projections to get to the reality of that environment. We’re giving an indication of it—we take an element of it, like ‘isolation’. We don’t need to create mountains or have cold or wind. Isolation. How do we do that? Well, an isolated light source can create that. Or a soundscape that suggests isolation. We don’t need to hear wolves. We don’t need to hear wind. Because that diminishes the larger idea of isolation by making it specific. Sound can, in this production, be chosen to function as a metaphor, as a symbol, rather than as a realistic thing.