

THE STANFORD DEPARTMENT OF DRAMA 2003-2004 PRESENTS:

MARIA

BY ISAAC BABEL

**TRANSLATION BY
PETER CONSTANTINE**

**ADAPTED FOR THE STANFORD STAGE BY
GREGORY FREIDIN**

**DIRECTED BY
CARL WEBER**

FEBRUARY 19-21 AND 26-28 AT 8PM

FEBRUARY 29 AT 5PM

PIGOTT THEATER

STANFORD UNIVERSITY

photo credits:

Davey Hubay • Alexey Smirnov



MARIA

BY ISAAC BABEL

TRANSLATION BY PETER CONSTANTINE

adapted for the Stanford Stage

by Gregory Freidin

Director

Carl Weber

Set Design

Mark Guirguis

Costume Design

Connie Strayer

Sound Design

Adrian Coburn

Lighting Design

Andrew M. Reid

Dramaturgy

Gregory Freidin

Kathryn Syssoyeva

Stage Manager

Lisa Vargas

STAFF

Assistant Director

Assistant Stage Managers

Light Board Operator

Sound Board Operator

Dresser

Makeup

Run Crew

Kathryn Syssoyeva

Eli Peterson

Lisa Rowland

Malika Williams

Stephanie Friedman

Ean DeVaughn

Jennifer Rose Carr

Pallen Chiu

Yana Kesala

Meghan Dunn

Turntable Controls By: Systems West

CAST

(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Isaac Markovich Dymshits Zack
Bishonkov (*a cripple*) James Poskin
Yevstigneich (*a cripple*) Matthew Griffin
Viskovsky Kyle Gillette
(*a former captain of the guard*)
Filip (*a cripple*) James Lyons
Lyudmila Nikolaevna Mukovnina Audrey Dundee Hannah
(*daughter of General Mukovnin*)
Katerina Vyacheslavovna Velzen (Katya) Rachel Joseph
(*a live-in relative of the Mukovnins*)
Nikolai Vasilievich Mukovnin Thomas Freeland
(*a former general in the Czar's army*)
Nefedovna (*the Mukovnin's nanny*) Kathryn Syssoyeva
Sergey Hiliaronovich Golitsyn Michael Hunter
(*a former prince*)
Kravchenko Tim Youker
(*a former Czarist officer, now in the Red army*)
Madame Dora Ana Carbatti
Inspector Dan Gindikin
Policeman Eli Peterson
Drunk in Police Station Brad Rothbart
Kalmykova Holly Thorsen
Red Army Soldier Daniel Sack
Agasha (*a janitor*) Mandana Khoshnevisan
Andrei (*a floor polisher*) Edward Drapkin
Kuzma (*a floor polisher*) Justin Liszanckie
Aristarkh Petrovich Sushkin Barry Kendall
(*an antiques dealer*)
Safonov (*a worker*) Andrew Hendel
Elena (*his wife*) Emily Fletcher
Nyushka (*a young woman from the country*) Lisa Rowland

A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

It was in 1961, the year the Berlin Wall was erected, that I first encountered a text by Isaac Babel, a slim paperback titled *Budyonny's Reiterarmee* (*Red Cavalry* in English translation). Reading these short stories, I was immediately caught by the power and scope of Babel's vision, the way he captured the events described in their complex reality, in their ambiguities and abrupt turns from horrifying cruelty to the grotesque and, often, farcical behavior, as he had witnessed it all while serving with the Soviet cavalry during the Polish campaign of 1920.

When a few years later, in 1964, an at the time completely unknown play, *Maria*, received its first ever production in Italy and, soon after, in Germany, I got hold of the German translation and rediscovered what had fascinated me in Babel's cavalry stories. There was, in addition, the amazing dramatic structure he had created to unfold his narrative of an odd assembly of people who, caught in the turmoil of 1920 civil-war Petersburg, are swept way down, or up, from their previous station in Russian society. It was the combination of vibrant, colorful, often controversial characters and Babel's particular epic, one might say: film-like, dramaturgy that made me keen on staging the play. By then, I was living and working in America, and I tried to interest producers and regional theaters in Babel's daring text — a rather naïve attempt, I must admit. Since there was no English translation yet available and I could only describe the play and explain what made it so fascinating to me.

When Gregory Freidin approached the Drama Department and asked if we would stage one of Babel's two plays for the conference "The Enigma of Isaac Babel" that he planned for 2004, there came at last the occasion to explore in production the many aspects of *Maria* that had captivated as much as puzzled my imagination since I first read the text forty years ago. I hope that our audience will understand and share my fascination with Babel's play and the way he makes us watch women and men who are trapped in a world of rapid and cruel change, while they try to negotiate events beyond their control that might either destroy or lift up their lives.

—Carl Weber

ISAAC BABEL'S *MARIA*

Babel's second play, *Maria*, is set in Petrograd in the winter-spring of 1920. This was the third year of the Russian Civil War. The old regime began to collapse under the pressure of WWI early in 1917; the tsar abdicated in March; in November, the Bolsheviks seized power, provoking the Civil War when they dissolved the elected Constituent Assembly in January of 1918. For the Bolsheviks, Russia was "the weakest link in the capitalist chain," and they forced the Civil War in order to ignite the revolution in the more advanced Western countries, thereby speeding up the triumph of socialism all over the world. This goal remained elusive, and although the Soviet Union became an industrial superpower somewhere along the way, the means employed in pursuing it led to death, privation, and destruction on a historically unprecedented scale. What happens to the Mukovnin family in the play is an early part of this story.



Babel, in 1922

Babel did not have the benefit of historical hindsight. When he was writing the play in 1933, the socialist experiment in Russia still had some luster, especially if seen against the background of the economic crisis in the West, fascist dictatorship in Italy, and Hitler's ascension to power by constitutional means in the depression-ravaged Germany. Seen in this light, Soviet Russia could still be seen as a promising, if grossly imperfect, work in progress, and the world-famous Soviet author Isaac Babel—however intelligent, informed, and skeptical (and he was all of these)—had powerful reasons to hedge his bets, including the flow of royalties he received as a Soviet author. *Maria*, then, was very much a product of its uncertain time, and it is filled with the ambiguities and ambivalences, refracted through the prism of Russia's recent history.

Yet, Babel went to some lengths to make *Maria* chronologically precise: its action is dated by the references to the beginning of the Polish campaign in the spring of 1920, the subject of Babel's famous *Red Cavalry* (1926). In the former imperial capital, this third year of the civil war was remembered for its being the harshest, coldest, and most brutal. As the Civil War unfolded, the Bolsheviks abolished all forms of private commerce and much of money economy, substituting for them War Communism, a universal rationing system that gave them full control. Before



Schoolteachers selling their belongings in the street, 1919.

long, life became reduced to its barest minimum, and even that could hardly be supported by the meager, starvation rations. Black market burgeoned, crime proliferated. Petrograd—an abandoned capital since 1918, when the new government moved to Moscow—was sinking into a state of nature. In the winter, giant snow drifts covered the city, in the spring, young grass was breaking out through the cobblestones on Nevsky Avenue, and side streets were being transformed into fields of weeds. Class and status distinctions had vanished, and aristocrats, revolutionaries, poets, and black-market dealers were thrown together in this freezing pit of a Russian Apocalypse.

Although some saw redemption in man's return to a primeval state, many were crushed under the rubble of the old regime. Life was laid bare and lost all pretenses to civilization (in the winter, indoor plumbing froze, and the city was covered by excrement). All that mattered were the instincts, the will, and the wits of the men and women inhabiting the sub-arctic Hobbesian world.

As a writer, Babel was in his element, a witness to raw nature breaking through the cracks of one of civilization's most beautiful shells.

Night has no mercy. The wind slashes and cuts you down. The dead man's fingers are feeling through St. Petersburg's the icy innards. A crimson sign of the pharmacy shines frozen at the street corner. The pharmacist's head with parted hair is dropped to one side. The frost has seized the ink-stained heart of the pharmacy. And its heart has given out. Nevsky is empty. Ink bubbles are popping in the sky. The time is two o'clock. It's the end. The night has no mercy.¹

So ran one of his stories datelined "Petersburg, 1918." Written fifteen years later, *Maria* echoes these words with uncompromising starkness. It is in this world—the

nocturnal world of a dying metropolis—that the action of *Maria* is set to unfold.



Number 86, Nevsky Prospekt

Like much of what Babel has written, the play has powerful autobiographical overtones. Some are on the surface. Maria Mukovnin's letter read in Scene Five echoes Babel's masterpiece, *Red Cavalry*, based on his service with Budenny's Cossacks Army. Less apparent, but clear to some of his friends, the play is rooted in Babel's sojourn in St. Petersburg-Petrograd in 1918–19. He lived then in

a hotel at Nevsky 86, where much of the play's action takes place, as the haunt of the play's Jewish entrepreneur and Babel's namesake, *Isaac Dymshits*. His friend Victor Shklovsky recalled his this period in 1924:

Babel lived at Nevsky 86. He lived in a hotel and lived alone. Others came and went. The house maids cleaned after him, tidied the rooms, took away the *night buckets* with food leavings floating in them. Babel lived his life, observing unhurriedly the hungry lechery of the big city. His own room was clean. He'd tell me that nowadays women often gave in before six o'clock, because trams stopped running soon afterwards. No, he was not merely a cool observer of went on around him. But it did seem to me that Babel, before going to bed, would put a full stop and sign every lived day—as if it were a short story. The craft and its instrument left their imprint on the man.²

In those days, Babel combined successfully, if incongruously, a career of a translator for the Petrograd Cheka with that of a staff writer for the anti-Bolshevik but socialist paper *New Life*. The Cheka, as the Bolshevik called their political police³, hunted down the enemies of the new regime and black market operators, like the play's Isaac Dymshits and Captain Viskovsky, while the journal, edited by his loyal patron and literary godfather, Maxim Gorky, criticized the inhumanity and brutality of that same regime (until Lenin closed it down in July, 1918). Babel the writer who could juggle these opposites and draw from them what he needed for his art. The seeds planted during his residence at Nevsky 86 bore their fruit in *Maria*.

ISAAC BABEL: A CHRONOLOGY

- 1894** Isaac Babel (Bobel) is born in Odessa, Russia's third largest city, to Feyga and Manus Bobel, a modest entrepreneur.
- 1899** Babel's sister, Mera, is born.
- 1905–11** Attends Odessa's Nicholas I Commercial School, studies violin with P.S. Stolyarsky, learns French, English & German, becomes an avid reader, tries his hand at writing, and frequents theater and opera.
- 1911–16** Studies economics and business at the Kiev Commercial Institute, meets future wife Evgeniia Gronfein.
- 1913** Publication of Babel's first known story, "Old Shloyme."
- 1914** Receives a temporary exemption from military service for reasons of health; drafts his story "At Grandma's."
- 1916** Completes studies at Kiev Commercial Institute, enrolls as a law student at the Petrograd Psycho-Neurological Institute. Meets Gorky, publishes two stories in Gorky's journal *Letopis*, writes for the Petrograd press.
- 1917** Charged with pornography by the old regime that soon collapses; volunteers for the Romanian front, travels to Odessa and Kiev.
- 1918** Works as a translator for the Petrograd Cheka, writes for Gorky's anti-Bolshevik *New Life*, organizes food procurement detachments in the Volga region, works for the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment.
- 1919** Returns to Odessa; works for the State Publishing House; marries Evgeniia Gronfein.
- 1920** With identity papers issued in the name of Kiril Vasilievich Lyutov, joins Semyon Budenny's First Cavalry Army as a correspondent for the army newspaper *Red Cavalryman* for the duration of the Polish campaign.
- 1921** Publication of "The King" (*Tales of Odessa*) in an Odessa newspaper.
- 1922** Travels in Georgia and the Caucasus, writes for a Georgian newspaper.
- 1923** Publication of *Red Cavalry* stories in an Odessa newspaper.

Autobiographical elements do not end there, and *Maria* should be seen in light of Babel's works and days in the decade that preceded its composition. In the 1920s and early 1930s, he was becoming increasingly controversial even as his fame in Russia and abroad was growing unabated. Much has been written about the pressures Babel had to contend with to conform to the party line in the arts or the brutal threats of Semyon Budenny. But he was subject to stresses of another sort as well. His complicated personal life—the logistics of supporting his mother in Brussels, his lover and mother of his first child, Tamara Kashirina, in Moscow, his wife and mother of his daughter Nathalie in Paris—required a lot of energy and imagination. What's more, they involved unrealistic and unrealized commitments to publishers and film studios, and the impossible financial schemes he had to resort to in order even to begin to discharge what he thought were his obligations. By 1932, there was also a budding romance with Antonina Pirozhkova... Isaac Babel was torn between the life of duty, which required calculation and maximizing his earning power (he saw this as his Jewish self, the play's Isaac Dymshits), and the life of art and romance (which he treated as his Russian soul, one embodied in the play's character of Maria).

The entire play is electrified by the currents flowing from these two thematic extremes. One pole is the pure capitalist rationality of Isaac Dymshits, the resident at



Maria Denisova, c. 1914

Babel's old Petrograd address; the other is the pure romance of the revolution embodied in the play's Maria Mukovnin who, like the young Babel, served in Red Cavalry in the Polish campaign. The two are linked through the person of Maria's sister, Lyudmila (literally, "pleasing to people"), a clumsily calculating victim of her own schemes. These two polar opposites and the figure that mediates them may be seen as a melancholy autobiographical meditation of a man—a writer and a public figure—in crisis. Almost forty and still unable to make a choice in his personal or public life, torn by conflicting demands of both, Babel was haunted by the thought of never again being able to repeat his spectacular feat of the mid-1920s, when the publication of *Red Cavalry* and *Odessa Stories* (1923–1926) brought him to the apex of fortune and fame.

There are indications that Babel may have conceived the play late in 1929 or early in 1930, around the tenth anniversary of the First Cavalry Army, when political pressure on him to redeem himself in the eyes of Budenny increased considerably. Around that time he obtained commissions, and advances, for this play from two theaters, but for one reason or another *Maria* remained on the drawing boards. Everything changed when he arrived at Gorky's villa in Sorrento in April 1933. There, away from his family and enjoying Gorky's famous hospitality and

- 1924** Babel's stories appear in the Moscow journals *LEF* and *Red Virgin Soil*, beginning Babel's fame. Moves permanently to Moscow. Attacked by Semyon Budenny for "defaming" the First Cavalry Army.
- 1925** Works in film, collaborates with Sergey Eisenstein on the script for a film *Benya Krik*, based on his *Tales of Odessa*. Romance with Tamara Kashirina. Babel's sister emigrates to Belgium; his wife, Evgeniia, leaves for France. Publication of "Story of My Dovecote" and another story of the childhood cycle.
- 1926** Publication of *Red Cavalry* (soon translated in German and French). Kashirina and Babel have a son, Mikhail. Babel writes *Sunset*, his first known play. Babel's mother emigrates to Belgium.
- 1927** Films *Benya Krik* and *Wandering Stars*, released. Breaks with Kashirina, leaving her his Moscow flat, rejoins his wife in Paris in July, finishes scripting the film *Chinese Mill* (1928).
- 1928** While Babel is in France, *Sunset* is produced successfully in Baku and Odessa and unsuccessfully, in Moscow. Babel returns to Russia in October and travels in the South of Russia.
- 1929** American edition of *Red Cavalry*. Gorky compares Babel to Nikolay Gogol and comes to Babel's defense when Budenny goes on the offensive. Babel's daughter Nathalie is born in Paris to Evgeniia Babel.
- 1930** Babel settles in a village outside Moscow. Critics begin to speak of Babel's "silence" as a writer. Babel is accused—falsely—of making anti-Soviet statements while abroad and succeeds in proving his innocence. 4th edition of *Red Cavalry*.
- 1931** Publication of two more "childhood" stories, one new tale of Odessa, and one story about collectivization of agriculture. Resumes his friendship with Gorky.
- 1932** Babel's new apartment in Moscow. Publication of four new stories including "The Journey" and "Guy de Maupassant." Romance with

- Antonina Pirozhkova. Babel leaves for Paris after Stalin grudgingly approves Babel's request to travel to France.
- 1933** Publication of *Stories* and *Red Cavalry* (8th edition). Works on a film project about Azef and writes a script of *Red Cavalry* for Pathé. Visits Gorky in Sorrento and there writes his play *Maria*. Returns to Paris via Rome and Florence. Returns hurriedly to Moscow, penniless. Speaks publicly about Italian fascism, travels to the Caucasus to write a book about the republic of Kabardino-Balkaria and its collectivized agriculture.
- 1934** Travels to the Donbass region to study industrialization. *Maria* is rehearsed in Moscow but production is delayed. Continues to work in dramatic form while publishing several new stories. Stays at Gorky's estate outside Moscow, involved in preparations of the First Congress of Soviet Writers. Meets André Malraux. Declares himself "practitioner of the art of literary silence" at the Writers' Congress. Babel's speech is reprinted in *Pravda*.
- 1935** *Maria* is published. André Malraux and André Gide demand the presence of Babel and Pasternak at the anti-fascist congress in Paris. Speaks at the Congress, travels in France and Belgium before returning to Russia. Babel and Pirozhkova establish a household.
- 1936** Begins collaboration with Eisenstein on the film *Bezhin Meadow*. With Malraux and Mikhail Koltsov travels to the Crimea to visit Gorky. Writers' Union awards Babel a dacha in Peredelkino. Mourns Gorky's death. Travels to Odessa to participate in the shooting of *Bezhin Meadow*.
- 1937** Daughter Lydia is born to Babel and Pirozhkova. The *Bezhin Meadow* project is denounced in *Pravda* and the film is destroyed. Works on the special Gorky issue of *USSR In Construction*. Babel's friends in the military disappear in the purge. Publication of "Di Grasso," recollections of Maxim Gorky, and "The Kiss."
- 1938** Works in Kiev on the film script, based on Nikolay Ostrovsky's *How*

encouragement, he wrote the first full draft of *Maria* in the space of two weeks—"a Herculean task," as he reported to his mother. Whatever else it may have been, *Maria* was also Babel's "return ticket." Back in September, 1932, he was grudgingly given permission—by Stalin himself—to travel to France for two months, ostensibly in order to collect his wife and daughter and bring them back to the USSR. He had now overstayed his allotted term by five months, lending credence to the rumors then rife in Moscow that he was planning to settle abroad for good. Whether or not he had entertained such plans seriously, by the time Babel arrived in Sorrento, he had decided to go back and felt it in his interest to have something new and substantive to show for his overextended absence.

In part, then, *Maria* was conceived as a conciliatory gesture intended for his old and increasingly powerful critics, the blustering Red Cavalry Commander Semyon Budenny and those who stood behind him: Klement Voroshilov, who replaced Trotsky as People's Commissar of Defense, and, ultimately, their omnipotent patron, Joseph Stalin. Neither Budenny nor Voroshilov, who aspired to command the armed forces of the red empire, could forgive Babel for presenting them in his *Red Cavalry* for who they were—brave and gifted leaders of a rag-tag Cossack army, but in the end, like their charges, uneducated, thick-skulled, and crude. Although they were Stalin's trusted military aides since the civil war, they ranked pretty low in sophistication among the Red Army's top brass, and Babel's *Red Cavalry*, with its success and popularity abroad, was for them a public relations disaster. Babel, who had no interest in participating in political contests, had tried to mend fences before but never in such an elaborate fashion as he did in *Maria*.

Steel Was Tempered. Story "Trial" is published. Finishes a play or script about the civil war hero Kotovsky. Wife Evgeniia Ezhova commits suicide. Sends a message to Malraux asking to be recalled to France; Malraux declines. Signs contract for an edition of collected works. Writes the script for the film based on Gorky's "My Universities."

1939 Writes a script for a film "The Old Square" about a falsely accused industrial manager. Arrest and non-stop 72-hour interrogations. Babel "confesses" and then repeatedly renounces his confessions, enters pleas to have the case reconsidered—all in vain.

1940 January 26: Babel is tried in camera, pronounced guilty of spying for France and Austria and belonging to a terrorist Trotskyist organization, and sentenced to death. January 27: Babel is shot.

1954 Babel is officially exonerated.

1955 Babel's *Collected Stories*, with an introduction by L. Trilling are published in NY.

1957 Selected stories, with an introduction by Ilya Ehrenburg, are published in Moscow.

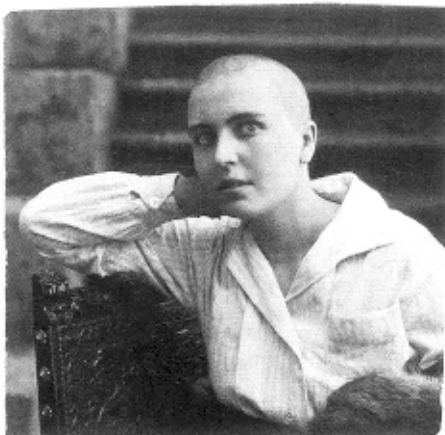


Babel, late 1920s.

Well-placed veterans of the Polish campaign of 1920 would have easily understood that the eponymous protagonist of the play, Maria Mukovnin, had a transparent prototype in the person of Maria Denisova. She was a famous Odessa beauty and the original inspiration—Giaconda—for Mayakovsky's great love epic, *Cloud in Pants*. A modern, independent woman with strong leftist convictions, she spent years studying sculpture and art in Switzerland from which she was expelled in 1919 as a political undesirable. Back in Russia, she joined what was to become Budenny's First Cavalry Army where, not unlike Babel, she worked for the Political Department making posters and conducting political education classes among the ranks during the Polish campaign. Most important for Babel's rehabilitation scheme, during this time Denisova met and soon afterwards married Efrem Afanasievich Shchadenko ("Akim Ivanych" in the play). Shchadenko was the Red Cavalry's number three man, after Clement Voroshilov and Semyon Budenny, and like them, he would climb to the highest ranks of the Soviet armed forces, accelerating his career during Stalin's Red Army purge.⁴ The unalloyed pathos of the Polish campaign that all of a sudden enters the play through the character of Maria was intended, among other things, as an olive branch, offered without fawning to the Red Cavalry trio.

There is little doubt that Babel's conciliatory message reached its intended addressee, and perhaps helped to lift some of the clouds that had been gathering around him in the mid-1930s. But it would be a mistake to see in this "auxiliary message" of *Maria* an artistic compromise. The revolutionary, romantic pathos of the Polish campaign serves a key constructive function in the play as it contrasts

sharply with its other motifs—the sterility of economic rationality, of greed, despair of people left behind, and darkness. It is this contrast and its deep ambivalence that accounts for the play's overall message and its integrity. The otherworldly Maria does not redeem her loved ones despite their innocence and their pleas. The strange gift she sends them in place of redemption—a pair of boots—may be seen as a hint to them to pack and be off. One can discern here echoes of Babel's own thoughts on his own and his family's emigration.



Maria Denisova, in 1920, during her army service and after three bouts of typhus.

Babel did not return to Russia until September, 1933, but the manuscript of the play preceded him there, as it traveled in the pocket of none other than Maxim Gorky—after Stalin, the most important patron of Soviet literature and the arts. Gorky himself had a mixed reaction to the play. He praised it at first, when Babel read it to him in Sorrento, but having looked at the manuscript found the play too ambiguous, too grotesque and parts of the dialogue, convenient fodder for anti-Semitism. No manuscript of *Maria* has survived, and we do not know if Babel had taken Gorky's criticism to heart. But perhaps, Gorky missed the point. The play

CHRONOLOGY OF RUSSIAN/SOVIET HISTORY: 1904-1940

1904	Russo-Japanese War
1905-07	The First Russian Revolution
1914	Russia enters World War I
1917	February Revolution (overthrow of Nicholas II); October Revolution (Bolsheviks seize power from the Provisional Government)
1918-21	Civil War and War Communism
1921	New Economic Policy (NEP)
1924	Lenin dies; Stalin begin his ascent to power
1929	First Five-Year Plan (industrialization and collectivization of agriculture)
1932-33	Famine in the countryside
1934	USSR joins the League of Nations; assassination of Sergei Kirov
1936	First Show Trial; adoption of the Stalin Constitution
1937-38	The Great Terror
1939	German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact; German and Soviet armies occupy Poland; in response, Great Britain and France declare war on Germany; World War II begins
1940	Conviction and execution of Soviet cultural and political leaders, including Isaac Babel, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Mikhail Koltsov, Nikolay Ezhov, Betal Kalmykov (357 people in all)
1941-45	Nazi Germany invades the Soviet Union and is eventually defeated
1953	Stalin dies. Beginning of de-Stalinization and rehabilitations of the victims of terror.

combines the psychological depth, and therefore the ambiguity, of a Chekhov play with the grotesquery of the avant-garde satire à la Mayakovsky's *Bath House* or Brecht's *Three-Penny Opera*. Babel was aiming at a new kind of theater, anticipating Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* by some two decades.



Babel with daughter Nathalie, in Paris, 1933.

A series of paradoxes posed by the play destined it, sooner or later, to run afoul of the Soviet censor. Babel was aware that *Maria*, as he wrote to his mother, did not toe the "general line." Indeed, the play ends before the woman worker gives birth with enough said to make the outcome of her

pregnancy—a common allegory for the revolution—to appear uncertain. Nevertheless, and in 1933-34 not unreasonably so, he had great hopes for *Maria* as a stage success and, more important, as a work opening a new period in his development as a writer. He also hoped that it would put an end to the rumors—no doubt, known to Stalin—that Babel's diminished output signified his unwillingness to take part in the construction of the Soviet Stalinist legend.

Thematically, *Maria* was a play following the fashions of the late 1920s and early 1930s and echoed what was by then a Soviet classic, Alexei Tolstoy's novel, *Sisters*, part of the trilogy entitled *Road to Calvary* (*Khozhdenie po mukam*, hence Babel's *Mukovnin*). Several civil war plays were successfully produced and enjoyed considerable critical acclaim. *Armored Train 1469* by his old friend and now the husband of his former lover, was a runaway success. In short, Babel had every reason to believe that *Maria* might do the same service for him.⁵ His earlier play, *The Sunset* (1928), had a mixed reception and premiered in Moscow in 1928 while he was in France. This time, he took great care in orchestrating his come-back in order to maximize the play's visibility, not to mention the income from advances. He had parts of the play published early in 1934 in Moscow and Leningrad and gave public readings at various venues, feeding the excitement and paving the way for the play's future triumph on stage. For awhile, everything proceeded according to plan. *Maria* was being considered, perhaps even rehearsed,



Babel at work, 1933.

simultaneously by two Moscow companies (the Vakhtangov Theater and the Jewish State Theater, where it was to play in Yiddish) and one in Leningrad.

But on December 1, 1934, the world changed. The assassination of Sergey Kirov, the Leningrad Party Secretary and a rising member of the Politburo, abolished the rules of the game and signaled the beginning of a new wave of repression. Staging a new play by an author as controversial as Babel became too risky for anyone to venture. When *Maria* was published in April, 1935, in the premier theater journal, it appeared carrying its own ball and chain. Running parallel with the text of the play was a patronizing and discouraging review by the arts editor of *Pravda*, Isai Lezhnev. The reader's eye could conveniently skip from the play's dialogue, printed on the upper part of the page, to Lezhnev's droning critique below where the reader could learn quickly whether Babel had overdone it on sex and underdone it on the class approach (Lezhnev thought he had done both). But the stringent reviewer left a glimmer of hope. Citing the author's private communication and some of the play's details suggesting that *Maria* was part of a sequel, Lezhnev advised Babel, if he wished to see his *Maria* on stage, to tone down the sex and to clarify his ideological stand in the upcoming *Maria II*. For awhile, Babel tried to oblige, though apparently without much success, or enthusiasm. The project was simply abandoned, sharing the fate of Babel's earlier plans to produce a peacetime sequel to *Red Cavalry*.

Busy with his lucrative assignments for the Soviet film industry, Babel now focused his efforts in the literary arena on preserving his legacy—negotiating new editions of his writings, with a few new or unpublished stories—all in the choking atmosphere of brutal ideological diktat and mounting mass terror. Gorky's passing in 1936 made Babel more vulnerable than ever. As his friends and colleagues were disappearing, all he had to protect him was his visibility among the anti-fascist circles in the West, especially France—for as long as Stalin hoped for an alliance with Western



Babel, just after his arrest in May 1939

powers against Hitler. By the spring of 1939, Stalin had decided to switch sides and seek a deal with Nazi Germany. Whether by coincidence or intent (we shall never know), Babel was arrested on May 15, 1939, soon after the pro-German Molotov replaced pro-Western Commissar of Foreign Affairs Maxim Litvinov. Seven months later, Babel was convicted of the preposterous crime of spying for France and Austria and for belonging to a "Trotskyist terrorist organization." He denied the charges throughout the investigation and during the trial, but he was shot in the Lubyanka basement the next day. His personal archive, confiscated during the arrest, has never been recovered despite his official exoneration in 1954.

As of this writing, the play has had successful runs in Italy, Czechoslovakia, and both East and West Germany in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. In 1979, it was adapted for and shown on BBC television. In 1990, it appeared on the theater stage in London Old Vic's. In 1994, it was finally staged in Russia by Mikhail Levitin in his Moscow theater "Ermitazh." Why *Maria* has not generated any stage history in the US is whole other story.

—Gregory Freidin

¹ "Khodya" (Chinaman), 1923.

²Victor Shklovsky, "I. Babel: A Critical Romance," *Lef* 2 (1924):153.

³ The Cheka, or the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Suppression of Counter-Revolution and Sabotage, was founded by decree in December, 1917, and continued under various names all throughout the Soviet period (GPU, NKVD, MVD, KGB). The security services of the post-communist Russia, the FSB, still consider themselves part of this unbroken tradition.

⁴ In 1937, Shchadenko (1885-1951), was appointed by Stalin Deputy People's Commissar of Defense to head the all-important Personnel Department of the Red Army.

⁵ Vsevolod Ivanov's *Armored Train 14-69* (1927), K. Trenev's *Liubov' Yarovaya* (1926), and Vs. Vishnevsky's *Pervaya konnaya* (1930), and of course, Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Days of the Turbins* (1927), which after Stalin's personal intervention became the mainstay of the Maly Theater repertoire.

Photos of Maria Denisova are from the catalogue of the Denisova Exhibition at the Mayakovsky Museum in Moscow. The Committee on Culture of the City of Moscow and V.V. Mayakovsky State Museum. Pictures of Civil War Petrograd are from the Sokolov Album at the Hoover Institution Archives. Other photographs are courtesy of the Hoover Institution Archives. Cover photo by Davey Hubay.

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DEPARTMENT OF DRAMA

PRODUCTION STAFF

Director of Production	Michael Ramsaur
Technical Director	Ross Williams
Production Stage Manager	Alison Duxbury
Shops Supervisor	Paul Strayer
Costume Designer	Connie Strayer
Scenic Designer	Mark Guirguis
Costume Shop Supervisor	Birgit Pfeffer
Technical Supervisor	Kenny McMullen
Publicity Coordinator	Mandy Khoshnevisan
Prop Master	Christina Chao
Set Shop Crew	Michele Cash, Mollie Chapman, Joseph Frega, Melisa Hill, Chienlan Hsu, Chris Junge, Margaret Lee, Becca Thal, Alexei Syssoyev, John White
Costume Technicians	Mindy Lieu, Katie Furuyama
Costume Crew	Jennifer Beichman, DeMara Cabrera, Megan Cohen, Kristen Del Rio, Anna Kerrigan, Emily Livadary, Alida Payson, Linda Serrato

SPECIAL THANKS

Davey Hubay, Larissa Rhyzhik, Toby Holtzman, Galina Leytes, Stanford University, Department of Slavic Languages & Literatures, Center for Russian, East-European, & Eurasian Studies, Taube Center for Jewish Studies, Division of Literatures, Cultures, & Languages, Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Institute for International Studies, Stanford Humanities Center, Irwin T. & Shirley Holtzman, The Leytes Foundation.

UPCOMING FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF DRAMA...

The Metamorphosis, by Franz Kafka, directed by Matthew Daube
Mar. 3–6 at 8pm, Mar. 5 at 10:30pm & Mar. 7 at 2pm. Nitory Theater, Old Union

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will run
without an
intermission.

There will be
smoking
onstage
during the
performance.

There will be
gunshots
onstage
during the
performance.

Photography
and
Videotaping
are Prohibited.