



SOUTH COAST REPERTORY
presents



by George F. Walker
directed by Martin Benson

SEGERSTROM STAGE
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PLAYGOER'S GUIDE

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Honorary Producers

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Part I: THE PLAY

SYNOPSIS AND CHARACTERS

Nothing Sacred is a story of violent passions and radical politics played out in the rural countryside of pre-revolutionary Russia. The year is 1859—when long-held beliefs about class, authority, and power are teetering on the brink of collapse. Although the official Emancipation Manifesto of Tsar Alexander II is still two years away, the more forward-thinking members of the landed gentry have already begun freeing their serfs in halting attempts to inch feudal Russian society closer to Western ideals of liberty and progress.

Such a man is Nikolai Kirsanov (RICHARD DOYLE), a modest landowner who takes great pride in running his downtrodden estate in rural Russia with a liberal hand. Nikolai's flamboyant brother, Pavel (JOHN VICKERY), has no desire to challenge the status quo but rather clings tenaciously to his old aristocratic ways. Nikolai's son, Arkady (DANIEL BLINKOFF), a closet traditionalist who is returning home after graduating from college in St. Petersburg, is under the spell of anarchic notions learned at the feet of his best friend, the haughty nihilist Bazarov (ERIC STEINBERG). A self-appointed champion of the peasantry (although they mock him behind his back), Bazarov seeks to destroy all aspects of Russian society, leaving it to future generations to pick up the pieces.

Watching and waiting for the right moment to make her move is Anna Odintsov (KRYSTYNE HAGE), a wealthy widow whose mysterious past links her to both Bazarov and Pavel. Fenichka (ANGELA GOETHALS) is Kirsanov's naïve young housekeeper, whose infant son was fathered by her free-thinking master. Additional characters include Kirsanov's servants Piotr (HAL LANDON, JR.) and the Bailiff (JEREMY JOHNSON), Bazarov's old friend Viktor Sitnikov (JEFFREY MARLOW), and peasants Gregor (JEREMY GUSTIN) and Sergei (ISAAC NIPPERT).

The parallels between Walker's imaginary Russia and contemporary counterculture are unmistakable. *Nothing Sacred* proves that generational conflict is unbound by time or geography and will likely persist as long as sons—and daughters—keep coming home from college with radical new ideas that fathers—and mothers—reject as ridiculous.

RUSSIA IN THE AGE OF TURGENEV

A direct descendant of the Romanov dynasty that had reigned since 1613, Nicholas I was “Emperor of all Russia” from 1825-55. During his thirty-year rule, absolutism flourished as the Tsar strove to suppress liberal thought, control the universities, strengthen censorship and persecute religious and ethnic minorities.

When Alexander II succeeded his father in 1855, the Crimean War had already been raging for a year and tentative peace talks had begun. Following Russia's humiliating defeat in 1856, the Treaty of Paris brought not only a loss of territory and military superiority, but also marked the beginning of unprecedented social upheaval. The first item on Alexander's reform agenda was to abolish that most archaic and disgraceful aspect of Russian society—the survival of serfdom.

Although the practice had long since disappeared from the rest of civilized Europe, serfdom in Russia was protected by a rigid legal status. Russian serfs were considered the property of their owners, who could buy, sell and trade them at will. It is estimated that by the mid-19th century, as many as 40 million serfs still lived in Russia, most of whom belonged to members of the nobility, to the church, and to the Tsar.

Russian rulers since Catherine the Great had made halting attempts to address the scourge of serfdom with little success. Yet from the moment of his accession to the throne, Alexander II moved rapidly and effectively towards its elimination, despite vigorous objection from landowners. “It is better to abolish serfdom from above,” he warned the outraged gentry, “than to wait for the time when it will begin to abolish itself from below.”

Alexander issued his Emancipation Manifesto in 1861, which not only gave Russian serfs their personal freedom but also required landlords to provide each family with a plot of land for a fixed rent. In addition, peasants had the right

to purchase their plots with government loans to be repaid—with interest—over forty-nine years. Thus millions of emancipated serfs suddenly found themselves either landless or plunged into hopeless debt.

The abolition of serfdom was followed by many other important changes in local government, the law and the army, but the second half of Alexander's reign was characterized by repression and turmoil. The more extreme radicals engaged in acts of increasing terrorism that culminated in the Tsar's assassination by student agitators in St. Petersburg in 1881, thus replacing Russia's greatest era of peaceful reform with a violent stride toward revolution.

FATHERS AND SONS

Turgenev completed *Ottsy i deti* (literally translated as “Fathers and Children”) in 1861 and published it the following year in the *Russian Herald* magazine. Although many English translations have since appeared, the Oxford World Classics edition published in 1991, translated and introduced by Richard Freeborn, makes the age-old conflict between generations seem as fresh, outspoken and exciting as it must have been to those readers who first encountered Evgeny Vasilich Bazarov, the book's controversial “nihilist”* hero, in 1862. Turgenev paints a fascinating portrait of a Russian society teetering precariously between stagnant tradition and radical change—a potent image that continues to resonate today. As the first translator with access to Turgenev's working manuscript, Richard Freeborn also provides the first English translation of some of the great writer's preparatory sketches for the novel.

Fathers and Sons is set during the six-year period of social upheaval, from Russia's defeat in the Crimean War to the Emancipation of the Serfs in 1861. The novel's central character is Bazarov, a young medical student and nihilist who has been described as the “first Bolshevik” in Russian literature. Hugely controversial in Russia for its concern with social and political issues and its sympathetic portrayal of the revolutionary Bazarov, the novel found much greater acceptance in France, Germany, and England. Today, *Fathers and Sons* is hailed as Turgenev's greatest achievement and is considered a vital predecessor to the later works of such giants as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev (1818-1883) ranks among the literary legends of Russia. His life parallels in some ways the lives of his characters in *Fathers and Sons*. For example, like the fictional Arkady, Turgenev lived on a family estate where he observed daily the inhumane treatment of servants; like Arkady, he attended the university in St. Petersburg; and like Pavel, Kirsanov and Bazarov, he fell in love with a captivating woman who forever eluded him. However, Turgenev contrasted with his characters in that politically he was neither a conservative, like Nikolai and Pavel, nor a radical, like Bazarov and Sitnikov. Instead, he was a moderate liberal who favored gradual change and who spent considerable time living and studying abroad, absorbing prevailing ideas and popularizing Russian literature in western Europe. Besides *Fathers and Sons*, his major works include the play, *A Month in the Country* (1850), and the novels *On the Eve* (1860) and *Smoke* (1867).

*The word “nihilism” is derived from the Latin *nihil*, meaning “nothing.” It refers to a radical philosophy that calls for the destruction of existing traditions, customs, beliefs, and institutions, and requires its adherents to reject all values, including religious and aesthetic principles. In other words, nihilists do not believe in anything. Although the term was coined in the Middle Ages to describe religious heretics, Turgenev resurrected it to describe 19th-century Russian radicals and revolutionaries. The character of Bazarov was—and still is—the most famous nihilist in the world, even though he never actually existed.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Nothing Sacred premiered in a much-discussed commercial production at CentreStage, Toronto, in January 1988, directed by Bill Glassco. The script and its creator won all of the major Canadian drama awards (see below) and went on to become one of the most popular plays on American regional stages. Following its 1988 U.S. premiere at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, where critics labeled it “Play of the Year,” *Nothing Sacred* was produced at American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, Arena Stage in Washington, DC, Atlantic Theatre Company in New York City, and Seattle Repertory. In 1994, George F. Walker co-directed (with Patrick McDonald) a production of his prize-winning play at the Winter Garden Theatre in Toronto.

PRIZES AND PRAISES

The Floyd S. Chalmers Canadian Play Awards were given from 1980-2001 to Canadian plays produced by any professional Canadian theatre company having at least ten performances in the Toronto metropolitan area. With a monetary value of \$25,000, the prize was one of several arts awards created by the Chalmers family of Toronto to honor exceptional individuals from over a dozen arts disciplines.

The Dora Award is an annual prize that honors Canadian theatre and dance productions in five major categories: General Theatre, Independent Theatre, Dance, Opera and Theatre for Young Audiences. Named after Dora Mavor Moore, who helped establish professional theatre in Canada, the award was established in 1981. Each winner receives a bronze statue made from the original by John Romano.

The Gascon-Thomas Award recognizes exceptional achievement in theatre. Each year, two Canadian artists (one Anglophone and one Francophone) are singled out and honored for their efforts to shape the world of theatre, and for their status as role models to students at the National Theatre School of Canada. NTS's Board of Governors created the award in 1990 in memory of two of the School's founders, Jean Gascon and Powys Thomas.

The Governor General's Performing Arts Awards were created in 1982 to celebrate artists who, over a lifetime of achievement, have made an indelible contribution to Canadian cultural life. Each year, six recipients are selected from the fields of theatre, dance, classical music and opera, and popular music. The awards are not a competition but intended as homage to outstanding performers. Winners receive a cash gift and a medallion designed and struck for the occasion.

The Order of Canada is the highest civilian honor, recognizing the exceptional lifetime contribution of individuals from all segments of Canadian society who have enriched the lives of others and made a difference to the country. The badge of the Order is a medal inscribed with the motto *Desiderantes Meliorem Patriam* ("They desire a better country.")

"No other living playwright pushes the boundaries of comedy as far, and with often stunning results."

Chicago Sun Times

"In its ability to embrace everything including despair and hope, even while questioning all of it, *Nothing Sacred* is a triumph."

Jam! Showbiz

"... always alive and entertaining. *Nothing Sacred* gives us old Russia refracted through modern North American sensibilities. [...] It provokes uneasy thought about oppression and revolution, stasis and change."

Newsday

"In an era when talk is a product designed to capture ratings and what passes for humor is created by committees of gag writers, there is something to be said for lively conversation and deft wit. Both are in ample supply in *Nothing Sacred* [...] peopled with vivid characters who have a lot to say—and say stylishly—about politics, government, freedom, power, revolution, religion, tradition, class distinctions and love."

New York Times

Part II: THE PLAYWRIGHT

A GREAT NORTHERN LIGHT



George F. Walker is one of Canada's most creative and prolific playwrights. He has received eight Chalmers Awards, five Dora Awards, two Governor General's Awards, the Gascon-Thomas Award, and in 2000, he was made a Member of the Order of Canada (see above). His work has been translated into German, French, Hebrew, Turkish, Polish and Czechoslovakian and has been staged internationally to widespread acclaim.

Walker was born in 1947 in Toronto's working-class East End, which is the setting for many of his plays. He was driving a cab in the early 1970s when he happened to see a poster for the Factory Theatre Lab, which was looking for new scripts. Having seen only one theatre production in his life, Walker penned the two-character drama *Prince of Naples* in a week and sent it off. The Factory produced it in 1972 and offered Walker a five-year contract as playwright-in-residence.

He also likes to direct his own plays in order to avoid being "sabotaged by boy wonder directors." When Walker directs, he always tells the cast, "It's not about me anymore. The playwright's dead [...] but if there is a problem, I can always resuscitate him." On the other hand, he assiduously avoids appearing in public, especially opening nights which, even after 30 years in the business, still make him nauseous.

PLAYS BY GEORGE F. WALKER

Prince of Naples (1971); *Ambush at Tether's End* (1971); *Sacktown Rag* (1976); *Bagdad Saloon* (1973); *Beyond Mozambique* (1974); *Ramon and the White Slaves* (1976); *Gossip* (1977); *Zastrozzi*, *The Master of Discipline* (1977); *Filthy Rich* (1979); *Rumors of Our Death* (1980); *Theatre of the Film Noir* (1981); *Science and Madness* (1982); *The Art of War* (1983); *Criminals in Love* (1984); *Better Living* (1986); *Beautiful City* (1987); *Nothing Sacred* (1988); *Love and Anger* (1989); *Escape from Happiness* (1991); *Tough!* (1993); *Suburban Motel: Problem Child*, *Criminal Genius*, *Risk Everything*, *Adult Entertainment*, *Featuring Loretta*, *The End of Civilization* (1997); *Heaven* (2000).

Part III: THE PRODUCTION

CAST AND ARTISTIC COMPANY

Print the program at <http://www.scr.org/season/06-07season/programs/sacredprog.pdf>

DESIGNING WALKER'S WORLD

"The play takes place in Russia, in late spring, 1859. The periphery of the set should be a kind of minimalist landscape. Mostly open fields with the occasional slope. A suggestion of forests. The rest is a bare dark hardwood floor. The various locations in the play must be suggested simply with as few pieces of furniture as possible."

Playwright George F. Walker was spare with his stage directions for *Nothing Sacred*, which left a great deal of decision-making up to director Martin Benson and his stellar design team. Here's a glimpse into the creative thought processes of two of those talented artists:

SIGHTS

The primary challenge facing Costume Designer Angela Balogh Calin, in addition to accurately portraying both the period and setting of the play, was to visually express the clash between classes that fuels much of the dramatic action. Members of the landed gentry in pre-revolutionary Russia strove to emulate European aristocracy in manner and fashion, in sharp contrast to the traditional rustic garb of the lower-class peasants and serfs. As a native of Romania, Calin grew up in close proximity to both the countryside and culture of Russia, which she studied intently as part of her design training. In preparing to work on *Nothing Sacred*, she turned to some of her favorite Russian painters for inspiration, including the famed portraitist Valentin Serov (1865-1911) and Ilya Repin (1844-1930), the most celebrated Russian realist of his day. (Examples of Calin's costume renderings for *Nothing Sacred* appear in the program.)

SOUNDS

Nothing Sacred is not a musical, so audiences may be somewhat startled to hear the actors singing—and in Russian no less—even before the first line of dialogue has been spoken. For sound designer Michael Roth, this play is about the need to communicate honestly and openly, without pretension or dissembling. His highly imaginative approach to expressing this theme musically is to use the Russian translation of Walker's stage directions as lyrics to

accompany his own original music. While the language of the words being sung may be unintelligible to most audience members, their meaning within the context of the play is never in doubt as Roth's unique creative vision adds yet another dimension to the fascinating visual and aural world of the play.

Part IV: RESOURCES

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Alexander II: The Tsar Liberator

<http://www.alexanderpalace.org/palace/AlexIIbio.html>

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<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2004/04/12/192034.php>

Guide to Ivan Turgenev

<http://www.turgenev.org.ru/en/>

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Novels of Turgenev: Symbols and Emblems

<http://eis.bris.ac.uk/~rurap/novels.htm>

Reader's Guide to *Fathers and Sons* (featuring study questions)

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