

Rebecca Davis – Journey in Russia
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**Acting in St. Petersburg:
A Performance at The American Center**

Why Does a Choreographer Need Acting Experience?

Dance has always been the central focus of my life. My mother used to say that I was “dancing and choreographing in the womb” because I “kicked” around so much in her stomach! Nevertheless, my fascination with classical literature and world history has led me to experiment with different art forms. I aspire to communicate literature and history to audiences through my choreography, but dance alone is not sufficient to fully capture the power and nuances of these subjects. For that reason, I have been exploring the field of drama and theater, both in the US and in Russia. This practice was augmented in January when I had the opportunity to participate in a play called *Time and The Beast* performed in St. Petersburg.

The Fulbright Connection

One of the best parts about being a Fulbright scholar is the network of people who suddenly become accessible to you. One such example is playwright *Marina Shron*, a current Fulbright scholar teaching in St. Petersburg. While in New York, Shron wrote a new play that examines the relationships between Jacob and his two wives, Rachel and Leah, in The Bible. The play, *Time and The Beast*, follows these three characters through different historical periods: Biblical times, Ukraine/Russia in 1905, Germany in 1943, and present-day New York. As part of her Fulbright work in Russia, Shron is staging readings of her play in Moscow and St. Petersburg in English.

Casting The Play

Shron used her knowledge of actors and artists in Russia to cast the characters for the St Petersburg reading. I have to admit that she was definitely a little hesitant to cast me at first, knowing that I am a “dancer by training”, and not an actor. However, my enthusiasm and willingness to rehearse won her over in the end – lucky for me!

The two other roles were performed by professional actors. Francesca Carlin is working in Russia on a Fulbright scholarship. In Moscow, Carlin teaches and studies at *The Moscow Art Theater (MXAT)* and *The Shukin Drama School*. The male actor, who played the role of Jacob, is a professional actor working in St. Petersburg. (He turned in an impressive performance, especially considering that English is his third language!)

Rehearsing The Reading

Shron gave each of the cast members a copy of the script and met with us to discuss the themes and characters in the play. I had the chance to meet with her twice privately and read

through my scenes. After I would read each scene, Shron gave me directions, such as “this line should be stronger because Leah (my character) is standing up to her sister”, or “this line is a reference to the first scene when Leah is mocking her sister.” Our rehearsals helped me understand the subtext as well as the director’s vision of the play.

We were only able to have one full-cast rehearsal before the performance. (Trying to coordinate schedules was challenging: a dancer in training and rehearsals, an acting student in Moscow, and a professional actor in St. Petersburg.) The group rehearsal was held at the apartment of the actor playing the leading male character. Sitting around a table with French coffee and Russian cookies, we read our parts and received further directions from Shron. Afterwards, we had just enough time to dash off to the performance.

Playing the Play

The reading of the play was held at *The American Center* in St. Petersburg. The American Center hosts a series of English-language programs throughout the year, and a regular group of Russian English-speaking guests attend. On this particular occasion, Shron invited many of her professional colleagues to also come to the reading.

After a short introduction, we started the performance. I was surprised how much easier it was “to act” in a performance setting as compared to the apartment where we had rehearsed. With the presence of an audience, there was an extra rush of adrenaline that could be immediately converted into my character’s dynamic emotions. By perceiving the audience’s reactions to certain lines, I could also sense what was “working”. Thus, I read the first two acts in performance far better than in rehearsal.

After a short intermission, we began the last section, acts three and four. By now I was more comfortable with reading, but my character was much harder to play in these acts. For example, Leah is pregnant in one of the scenes and constantly switches between talking to the doctor, her sister, and the child in her stomach. Leah is also emotionally exhausted and flips between moments of flamboyance and dark thoughts of despair. At times, I felt a little bit like I was playing Jack Nicholson from *One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest!*

At the conclusion of the play, there was a warm applause and we had an informal discussion with some of the guests. It was well received, and Shron proved her talent as a playwright in St Petersburg. For me, it was a great experience to express myself with words instead of movement. Such practice will influence my own creative process in the future, both as a performer and as a choreographer.