Three oranges stolen three times: Fyodor Komissarzhevsky's forgotten American projects and his collaboration with Victor Seroff

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Issue: Vol. 10, No. 1 (2026)

Abstract

This essay explores correspondence between two people: the world-famous Russian-born theater director Fyodor Fyodorovich Komissarzhevsky (Theodor Komisarjevsky) and an aspiring Russian émigré non-fiction writer Victor Ilyich Seroff. Their correspondence, held by the Houghton Library at Harvard University and dating from 1947-1950, provides a valuable tool for reconstructing the story behind this forgotten production of Sergey Prokofiev's opera, *The Love for Three Oranges*, at the New York City Opera in 1949 and several unrealized projects of the director. This intriguing story also reveals the evolution of the relationship between these two Russian-born European émigrés who settled in the United States in the 1930s—tracing the trajectory from friendship to confrontation. Although most of the surviving letters were sent from Seroff to Komissarzhevsky (and only one response from the director has been preserved), it is nevertheless possible to reconstruct the development of their collaboration based on the available material.

Three oranges stolen three times: Fyodor Komissarzhevsky's forgotten American projects and his collaboration with Victor Seroff

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Sergey Prokofiev's opera *The Love for Three Oranges,* written and premiered in the USA in 1921 in Chicago, was restaged on an American stage for the second time only more than twenty years later, in 1949. On this occasion, the venue was the New York City Opera – an ambitious theatrical project dedicated to popularizing classical opera among a broad public. The production was the work of three key figures: two Russian-born European émigrés – Fyodor Komissarzhevsky (Theodor Komisarjevsky) and Victor Seroff, and the American conductor Laszlo Halasz, of Hungarian birth. Despite the opera's popularity during seven seasons, it soon fell into obscurity in the United States for nearly six decades. Scholarly attention to the circumstances of its creation has emerged only recently. The correspondence found at the Houghton Library at Harvard University sheds new light on the intrigues surrounding this iconic production and provides rich material for analyzing the theatrical traditions employed by the world-famous director Fyodor Komissarzhevsky who was invited to stage this opera.

Fyodor Komizzarzhevsky (1882-1954), the son of an opera singer and the brother of beloved Russian actress Vera Komissarzhevskaya, played an active role in the theatrical innovations that emerged in Russia in the early twentieth century. He fled Soviet Russia in 1919, worked in Europe staging Russian and European classics as well as operas, and lived in England until 1939, when he moved to the USA.

Victor Seroff (1902-1979) also fled Russia in 1919, leaving his hometown Batoum (Batumi) on the last ship to Constantinople before the Bolshevik invasion. He also lived in Europe: in Austria, Germany, and France before eventually moving to the USA.

How these two people met and started their work on Prokofiev's opera is not known, but eventually their joint project was realized, premiering on November 1 and 2, 1949.

In the only existing biography of Komissarzhevsky, written by theatre scholar Victor Borovsky, the American period of the director's life is presented rather briefly, although the book covers both the Russian and British periods in great detail. Despite the fact that the author includes numerous fragments from

his unique interviews with Komissarzhevsky's widow, the American dancer Ernestine Stodelle, some of the projects the director worked on in the USA are not mentioned at all. Nor does the biography mention one of Komissarzhevsky's correspondents, whose letters the author of this article discovered in the Houghton Library at Harvard University.[1] Among this correspondence is the only letter by Fyodor Fyodorovich himself—though it is quite short and purely formal, suggesting that their communication shifted from friendly to official, and then, apparently, ceased.

The correspondence raises more questions than it answers, so I must clarify upfront that researchers still have much work to do in uncovering these stories in full. The correspondence revolves around two (or possibly three) joint projects, in which Komissarzhevsky was one of the participants.

Although some of the director's extensive correspondence has been found and partially published in Russia,[2] these particular letters were not included in these publications. They have never been released in English either.

[1] The Houghton Library. The Harvard Theatre Collection, bMS Thr 490 (91) – (179). Theodor Komissarjevsky, 1882-1954. Papers 1912-1970. Box 2 of 27; bMS Thr 490 (154) Seroff Victor Ilyich, 1902 – Correspondence with Theodor Komissarjevsky, 1949-1950, 1 folder. Ernestine Stodelle Chamberlain, 1957-1993/ *92-93.076.02

[2] F. F. Komissarzhevskii, *Ia i Teatr (Myself and the Theatre*) - *Memuary*, *Dnevniki*, *Pis'ma* (*Memoirs, Diaries, Letters*) (*Perepiska F. F. Komissarzhevskogo — Correspondence of F. F. Komissarzhevskii*) / Perevod I. L. Alpatovoi (Translated by I. L. Alpatova). Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1999; *Kanva sud'by. F. F. Komissarzhevskii. Avtobiografiia*. (*The Canvas of Fate. F. F. Komissarzhevskii. Autobiography*). *Prilozhenie: Pis'ma F. F. Komissarzhevskogo K. S. Stanislavskomu* (*1910-1915*) (*Appendix: Letters of F. F. Komissarzhevskii to K. S. Stanislavskii* (*1910–1915*)) / Publ., vstup. stat'ia i komment. M. V. Khalizevoi (Publication, introductory article, and commentary by M. V. Khalizeva) // *Mnemosina. Dokumenty i fakty iz istorii otechestvennogo teatra XX veka* (*Mnemosyne. Documents and Facts from the History of Russian Theatre of the 20th Century*) / Red.-sost. V. V. Ivanov (Ed.-comp. V. V. Ivanov). Moscow: Indrik, 2014. Issue 5. pp. 792–820; *Khronika nesostoiavshegosia vozvrashcheniia. F. F. Komissarzhevskii—E. K. Malinovskaia: pis'ma 1917—1934*. (*Chronicle of an Unfulfilled Return. F. F. Komissarzhevskii—E. K. Malinovskaia: Letters, 1917–1934*). *Prilozhenie: Pis'mo N. Ia. Beresneva F. F. Komissarzhevskomu* (1924) (*Appendix: Letter of N. Ia. Beresnev to F. F. Komissarzhevskii* (1924)) / Publ., *vstupit. stat'ia i komment*. *V. V. Ivanova* (*Publication, introductory article, and commentary by V. V. Ivanov*) // *Mnemosina. Dokumenty i fakty iz istorii otechestvennogo teatra XX veka*. Moscow: Indrik, 2019. pp. 369–418; «Velikii gertsog bez trona, bez rodiny i bez deneg». ("A Grand Duke Without a Throne, Without a Homeland, and Without Money"). *Pis'ma F. F. Komissarzhevskogo k M. A. Benua 1930-kh godov* (*Letters of F. F. Komissarzhevskii to M. A. Benois from the 1930s*) / Publ., vstupit. stat'ia i komment. M. V. Khalizevoi (*Publication, introductory article, and commentary by M. V. Khalizeva)* // *Mnemosina. Dokumenty i fakty iz istorii otechestvennogo teatra XX veka.* Moscow: Indrik, 2019. pp. 419–458; *Gorestnyi epistoliarii. Pis'ma F. F. Komissarzhevskogo V. G. Sakhnovskomu, O. D. Kamenevoi, A. V. Lunacharskomu i dr. 1915—1919* (*The Sorrowful Epistolary. Letters of F. F. Komissarzhevskii to V. G. Sakhnovskii, O. D. Kameneva, A. V. Lunacharskii, and others, 1915–1919*) / Publ., vstupit. stat'ia i komment. V. V. Ivanova (Publication, introductory article, and commentary by V. V. Ivanov) // *Mnemosina. Dokumenty i fakty iz istorii otechestvennogo teatra XX veka*. Vyp. 4 / Red.-sost. V. V. Ivanov (Issue 4 / Ed.-comp. V. V. Ivanov). Moscow: Indrik, 2009. pp. 324–351

While Komissarzhevsky's correspondent and co-author is less known, readers interested in the life and work of the American dancer Isadora Duncan may remember him being mentioned in all of her biographies—specifically those by Frederika Blair and Peter Kurth. Scholars of music might have read more than a dozen of Russian and European composers' biographies written by him and published in the USA, and in translation—in France and Germany. His name is Victor Seroff, and although he is referred to only as a musician in Duncan's biographies (he was indeed a musician in the 1920s), he later changed his occupation and became a well-known American non-fiction writer in the 1950-1970s. There is even his own biography, written by American journalist Morris Werner and published in 1931 in the USA.[3]

Seroff penned biographies of Shostakovich (1943), Rachmaninoff (1950), Ravel (1953), Debussy (1956), soprano Renata Tebaldi (1961), Chopin (1964), Mozart (1965), Liszt (1966), Berlioz (1967), Prokofiev (1968), Mussorgsky (1968), as well as a book titled *Common Sense in Piano Teaching*.[4] His book on *The Mighty Five,* published in English in 1948, was later translated into German and French.[5] In 1971, having fully mastered the craft of biographical writing, Seroff wrote and published a biography of Isadora Duncan, with whom he had been in close relationships during the last years of her life in France.[6]

Victor Seroff lived in New York from the late 1930s, having moved there from Paris, France.[7] Komissarzhevsky relocated from Great Britain to the USA

[3] M. R. Werner, *To Whom It May Concern: The Story of Victor Ilyitch Seroff*. (New York: Jonathan Cape & Harrison Smith, 1931).

[4] Victor Seroff, *Franz Liszt*. Freeport, NY : Books for Libraries Press, [1970, c1966]; Victor Seroff, *Renata Tebaldi, The Woman and the Diva*. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press [1970, c1961]; Victor Seroff, *Hector Berlioz* (New York : Macmillan Co., 1967); Victor Seroff, *Frederic Chopin* (New York : Macmillan Co.,1964); Victor Seroff, *Mighty Five : The Cradle of Russian National Music* (New York: Allen, Towne & Heath, 1948); Victor Seroff, *Debussy : Musician of France*. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, [1970, c1958]); Victor Seroff, *Maurice Ravel* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press [1970, c1953]); Victor Seroff, *Modeste Moussorgsky* (New York : Funk & Wagnalls, 1968); Victor Seroff, *Dmitri Shostakovich; the Life and Background of a Soviet Composer, by Victor Ilyich Seroff, in collaboration with Nadejda Galli-Shohat* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press [1970, c1943]); Victor Seroff, *Sergei Prokofiev ; A Soviet Tragedy : The Case of Sergei Prokofiev, His Life & Work, His Critics, and His Executioners* (New York : Funk & Wagnalls, 1968); Victor Seroff, *Common Sense in Piano Study* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls,1970); Victor Seroff, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (New York : Macmillan Co., 1965); Victor Seroff, *Debussy; Musician of France* (New York : Putnam,1956); Victor Seroff, *Rachmaninoff* (New York : Simon and Schuster, 1950); Victor Seroff, *Men Who Made Musical History* (New York : Funk & Wagnalls, 1969); Victor Seroff, *Frederic Chopin* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1964).

[5] Victor Seroff, *Groupe des cinq: Balakirev, Borodine, Moussorgsky, César Cui, Rimsky-Korsakoff; les héros de la musique russe, traduction française d'André Vaudoyer* (Paris : Éditions Le Bon Plaisir, 1949); Victor Seroff, *Mächtige Häuflein : der Ursprung der russischen Nationalmusik* (Zürich ; Freburg i. Br. : Atlantis Verlag, 1967).

[6] Victor Seroff, *The Real Isadora* (New York: Dial Press, 1971).

[7] The exact date of his move to the USA is unknown, but the Duncan dancer Jeanne Breschiani, director of the Isadora Duncan International Institute, thinks it was 1936—email to the author, April 3, 2022. Dr. Bresciani met Seroff in 1976 for cataloging Isadora Duncan's library which he brought from France – see Bresciani, Jeanne. "A Catalog of the

before World War II (by 1936 he had already been living between two countries). In America, he started to teach at Yale University and continued to direct—staging theater plays with his students. But it brought him no satisfaction and felt like a major step backward compared to what he had achieved in England: a reputation as a first-class director, his own theatre, and an enthusiastic fan base, including artists such as John Gielgud,[8] who highly valued Komissarzhevsky's methods and actor training system. Fyodor Fyodorovich constantly longed to return to England, but during his wartime absence, the theatre scene there changed, and his talents were no longer in demand.

Where and when Seroff and Komissarzhevsky first met is unknown, but according to Jeanne Bresciani, Seroff was in contact with Ernestine Stodelle, the director's last wife (although their friendship may have begun later). Stodelle, being a dancer, studied the techniques of Isadora Duncan, as evidenced by the program of her March 25, 1939, performance in Paris, reproduced in Borovsky's biography—the concert opened with a number titled *"Hommage à Isadora Duncan."*[9]

The correspondence stored in the Harvard archive is dated 1949–1950, though it is likely that some letters were written earlier, in 1947-48—this hypothesis is partially supported by Komissarzhevsky's biography. As for Seroff's own biography, it still remains riddled with gaps and awaits a dedicated researcher.

In July 1949, Komissarzhevsky finally left the USA for England, where his pre-war career had flourished and where he had longed to return for over a decade. From the letters excerpted in Borovsky's biography, it is evident that the director was willing to do any job necessary during the war—if only the British would bring him over by military aircraft or send an official invitation so he could buy a commercial ticket—just to escape America, where everything irritated him.[10] When he returned on September 1, 1949, after a largely fruitless trip, he was almost immediately hospitalized with a heart attack and underwent a long recovery. His illness prevented him from completing a production of Sergei Prokofiev's *The Love for Three Oranges* at the New York City Opera. This project is not mentioned at all in Borovsky's biography, likely because the production was completed by another director—Vladimir Rosing.[11]

The New York City Opera was not a typical theatre. It was established in July 1943 as part of the City Center of Music and Drama, to popularize opera among mass audiences.[12] Unlike at the elite Metropolitan Opera, ticket prices

Isadora Duncan Library in the Victor Seroff Collection." Unpublished MA thesis. New York University, 1982. Information on Jeanne Bresciani—https://www.idii.org/—accessed December 19, 2025.

[8] Sir Arthur John Gielgud (1904-2000) – English actor and theater director.

[9] Borovsky – ill. between p. 428 and 429

[10] Borovsky, p. 433

[11] Vladimir Rosing (1890–1963) was a Russian chamber singer (tenor), opera performer, stage director and musical theater producer, as well as a musical and public figure, whose professional and creative career developed primarily in England and the United States.

[12] See—Martin L. Sokol, *The New York City Opera: An American Adventure* (New York: Macmillan Collier, 1981).

were affordable, and operas were often performed in English translation. Its first musical director was Hungarian American conductor Laszlo Halasz, who held the post until 1951. His policies emphasized unusual repertoire, support of young singers, an ability to navigate financial challenges, and sometimes alienating performers and staff.[13]

One of the unusual operas he selected was *The Love for Three Oranges* by Sergei Prokofiev. It had not been performed in the U.S. for over twenty years, although the composer had written it there in 1919 for the Chicago Opera Association, which staged it in 1921- a few years before its premieres in Moscow and Leningrad.[14] Interestingly, Prokofiev's *March* and *Scherzo* from the opera became popular in the USA independently of the opera—the *March* was even used as the theme for the popular radio crime drama *The FBI in Peace and War.*[15] Because the opera was initially poorly received—due to its eccentricity, unfamiliarity of American audiences with Italian commedia dell'arte, and other reasons[16]—no opera companies in the USA showed further interest in it until Halasz took notice.

Victor Seroff, musician and aspiring writer, author of books on Shostakovich (1943), *The Mighty Five* (1948) and forthcoming biography of Rachmaninov (1950), was invited to translate the libretto, originally written by the composer and based on a fairy tale by Carlo Gozzi. In the program for the production, stored in the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library, the production team is listed: Laszlo Halasz as artistic and musical director, music by Sergei Prokofiev, English translation by Victor Seroff, prologue based on Gozzi's text by T.K. (i.e. Fyodor Komissarzhevsky, known in England as Theodore), and conductor Laszlo Halasz. It is noted that the production was Komissarzhevsky's idea, but the director was Vladimir Rosing, with John Primm as assistant director. Sets, costumes, and masks were by Mstislav Dobuzhinsky,[17] choreography by Charles Weidman,[18] masks made by Yuji Ito and Michael Arshansky.[19]

The premiere took place on November 1 and 2, 1949, at the New York

[13] See the obituary in New York Times: https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/31/arts/laszlo-halasz-first-director-of-city-opera-is-dead-at-96.html. Halasz was selected for the position of Music Director of City Center from among 63 candidates – see Sokol, 34.

[14] Tristan Paré-Morin, (2012) "Finding Harmony in Times of Hardship: Prokofiev's War and Peace," *Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate. Journal of Musicology*: v. 5, no. 1, (2012): 35.

[15] Sokol, 66

[16] Examining these factors is beyond the scope of the present article; they are analyzed in detail by an American scholar—Michael V. Pisani, "A Kapustnik" in the American Opera House: Modernism and Prokofiev's "Love for Three Oranges". *The Musical Quarterly*, Winter, 1997, Vol. 81, No. 4 (Winter, 1997): 487-515.

[17] Mstislav Dobuzhinsky (1875-1957)—a Russian Lithuanian artist, member of the group Mir Iskusstva (World of Art). In the 1920s he immigrated to Europe, later moved to the USA.

[18] Charles Weidman (1901-1975) – dancer, teacher and choreographer, one of the pioneers of modern dance in America.

[19] See -https://catalog.loc.gov/vwebv/holdingsInfo?searchId=18126&recCount=25&recPointer=35&bibId=16520647

City Center of Music and Drama (or simply "City Center," as it was commonly known)—the initial venue of the new opera company. The premiere was originally scheduled for October 27 but was postponed due to Komissarzhevsky's illness.[20] The opera remained successfully in the repertoire until 1955. In the *Annals: 1944–1981* section of Martin Sokol's monograph on the history of the New York City Opera, all production programs are listed, showing that after three initial performances in 1949, there were ten in 1950, eight in 1951, three in 1952 (after Halasz left), and two each in 1953, 1954, and 1955.[21] In some programs from 1950–1954, Komissarzhevsky is not mentioned, and David Thornton is listed as the author of the prologue; later, Komissarzhevsky reappears, only to be replaced again by Thornton. The two names alternate unpredictably, but Victor Seroff is always credited as the translator.

The libretto was published immediately in 1949, with no mention of Komissarzhevsky—not even as the originator of the concept. The listed authors were Carlo Gozzi, Sergei Prokofiev, and Victor Seroff.[22] However, a review in *Musical America* dated November 15, 1949, opens with a mention of the Russian director. The reviewer, Quintans Eaton, repeatedly emphasizes Komissarzhevsky's vital role in the production. He states that two Russian émigrés (the second one was artist Dobuzhinsky)—were invited to adapt the libretto. Both were deeply familiar with the cultural context in which the original concept had emerged, a concept born out of Prokofiev's collaboration with Meyerhold and the theatrical experiments of the pre-revolutionary years. As musicologist Marina Frolova-Walker notes, "In the case of Prokofiev, the connection with Meyerhold is evident even in the title of his celebrated anti-opera, since it was Meyerhold who rediscovered Carlo Gozzi's fable, adapted and then published it as a kind of manifesto piece in the first issue of his journal, in 1914; Meyerhold went so far as to call the journal *The Love for Three Orange*s. Although this was short-lived, and the play itself was never staged by Meyerhold, the idea of appropriating commedia dell'arte principles in the struggle against the naturalist theatre of Stanislavsky became for a time a central strategy in the practices of Meyerhold and his followers."[23]

Eaton provides a detailed prehistory of the production in the United States, beginning with the commissioning of the opera to Prokofiev and its early performances not only in Chicago (where it was a complete failure and received rather harsh reviews in the press)[24] but also in New York on February 14, 1922, and concluding with a description of the surviving costumes that Halasz brought

[20] See—Eaton Quaintance. "The love for three oranges newly staged at City Center," *Musical America* (November 15, 1949), p. 3,5.

[21] Annals 1944-1981, in Sokol, 253-293.

[22] The love for three oranges; after Carlo Gozzi's comedy. An opera in four acts. Libretto; free adaptation and translation by Victor Seroff. New York, Boosey & Hawkes, 1949.

[23] M. Frolova-Walker, "Russian Opera Between Modernism and Romanticism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera*. Ed. Marvyn Cook. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2005), 181-197, 182.

[24] See Edward Moore. "Love for three oranges" color marvel, but enigmatic noise. *Chicago Tribune*, December 29, 1921—https://chicagology.com/opera/loveforthreeoranges/

for the revival of the opera (the stage designer in 1921 was also the Russian émigré artist Boris Anisfeld). The opera, incidentally, was originally performed in French, although the translation was made by Seroff from Russian.

His article contained many interesting and valuable observations about the production. Main ideas of the author were:

1. The production of Prokofiev's opera, revived in New York and Chicago, was a fortunate find with original scores and costumes discovered in a Chicago warehouse. Directed and designed by Russians familiar with the traditions of Russian pre-revolutionary theater, the opera was adapted with some cuts and changes but kept its original spirit and satire. The English libretto, translated by Victor Seroff, retains some awkwardness but fits the opera's fantastical story, which pokes fun at opera tropes, politics, magic, and romance.
2. The staging and choreography faced challenges, including limited rehearsals, last-minute adjustments, and technical difficulties, but the production succeeded through creative solutions and strong performances. Highlights include the humor of the Royal Cook, the Prince's comic hypochondria, and the vivid characterizations enhanced by skillful direction.
3. The music cleverly references classical composers and the opera world, enriching the satire. Despite some rough edges, the company's effort was praised, and the production was well-received, even prompting an extra matinee popular with both children and adults.

The reviewer then examines in detail all the nuances of the production, comparing it with rehearsals and with the Moscow staging he had seen in 1927. He analyzes the music, costumes, sets, lighting, stage machinery, props (the oranges, delivered literally at the last moment), and the singers' performances, and concludes that the production truly turned out to be outstanding, although the ballet component was less successful, despite Weidman's efforts. Eaton confirms that Rosing developed Komissarzhevsky's plan and followed his original outlines – "Mr. Rosing labored valiantly to carry out the ideas of his confrere, already implicit in the completed and nearly completed settings."[25]

The score itself receives special praise. "How fantastic, indeed, is the whole web of this score. At each hearing, it turns up new riches of inventiveness, rhythmic subtleties, and rainbow colors. It is as insinuating as a slow wink; as savage as a whiplash. The performance by the orchestra of 68, the largest ever used for an opera in the City Center, was one of the vital elements in the success of the work, and Mr. Halasz's congeniality to the music was evident,"[26] notes Eaton. Emphasizing the satirical character of Prokofiev's music, he finds its allusions to Rimsky-Korsakov, Mussorgsky, Wagner, and even La Traviata, inserted by the composer with a sly squint.

Marina Frolova-Walker characterizes the modernist nature of the opera as follows: the fragmentary nature of the music and its deliberately anti-Wagnerian

[25] Eaton, 3.
[26] Eaton, 3.

character, the eclectic vocal style, including humorous references to operatic clichés. “Both on the musical and the dramatic level, the opera is therefore a Meyerholdian ‘montage of attractions’ (‘attractions’ in the fairground or circus sense; this is film director Sergei Eisenstein’s term). The attractions are of extremely varied nature but always deliberately superficial: we may chuckle at the list of illnesses enunciated by the doctors in unpunctuated, unmetered quavers, at the chorus of little devils that reminds us of five-finger exercises, at Chelio, who exhibits Rimsky-Korsakov’s octatonicism taken to an extreme, at the cross-dressed Cook (echoing another cross-dressing cook in Stravinsky’s Mavra), or at the total absurdity of the situation with the oranges and dead princesses when the narrative veers off the road and has to be salvaged by an extraordinary intervention of the ‘audience’. These chuckles, however, seem rather weak when compared to the ‘programmed’ audience responses to which both Meyerhold and Eisenstein aspired.”[27]

As we can see, the deep understanding of Meyerhold’s ideas, despite many disagreements between him and young Komissarzhevsky, and Fyodor’s active participation in the creation of the new Russian theater before the 1917 October Revolution helped him realize a vivid experimental production several decades later in the United States.

Commedia dell’arte, which became an integral part of the theatrical process in Russia in the 1910s, attracted Komissarzhevsky throughout his career.[28] Although contemporary scholars have concluded that this genre appeared in Russia long before the Silver Age, no one disputes the fact that the flowering of Italian mask comedy occurred in the 1900s–1910s. Meyerhold, who actively promoted this genre, undoubtedly influenced the young director, although Fyodor Fyodorovich rejected much of his senior colleague’s theatrical experimentation, as he repeatedly noted in his articles and books. Komissarzhevsky’s staging of Moliere’s comedy *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (The Middle-Class Aristocrat) at the Nezlobin Theatre in 1911 was his first experience in this genre.[29] It was followed by *Princess Turandot* in 1912,[30] Beaumarchais’s *The Doctor in Spite of Himself* at the Maly Theatre in 1913,[31] and other productions drawing on Italian mask comedy. However, Vladimir Solovyov, a specialist in commedia dell’arte and an associate of Meyerhold, was skeptical about Komissarzhevsky’s

[27] Frolova-Walker, 182-183

[28] On *commedia dell’arte* in Russia see: Olga Partan, *Vagabonding Masks. The Italian Commedia dell’Arte in the Russian Artistic Imagination* (Academic Studies Press, 2017). The topic is more widely covered in Russian: V.A. Shcherbakov, *Pantomimy Serebrianogo veka* (*Pantomimes of the Silver Age*) (St. Peterburg: *Peterburgskii teatral'nyi zhurnal*, 2014; V. A. Shcherbakov, “Russkii mif o Commedia dell’Arte. Prolog*”* (“The Russian Myth of Commedia dell’Arte. Prologue*”) Voprosy teatra. Proscaenium* (*Theatre Studies*. *Proscaenium*) 3-4, (2019): 252–273; Elena Yushkova. *Plastika preodoleniia* (*The Plastique of Overcoming*). Yaroslavl': YaGPU (Yaroslavl: Yaroslavl State Pedagogical University, 2009)

[29] I. Alpatova, *Vechnoe vo vremennom – Komissarzhevskii. Ia i* teatr (*The Eternal in the Temporal—Komissarzhevskii. Myself and the Theatre*). (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1999), 22–24.

[30] Ibid., 31.

[31] Ibid., 36-37.

explorations in this genre, believing that the novice director had replaced Gozzi's "theatre of marvels" with "psychology" and "verisimilitude."[32]

The idea of staging Carlo Gozzi's fairy tale *The Love for Three Oranges* arose in the circle of Meyerhold and his associates, Vladimir Solovyov and Konstantin Vogak. They wrote their own "divertissement" based on the eighteenth-century Italian playwright's play and published it in Meyerhold's journal of the same name in 1914.[33] "Although this journal existed only briefly and the play itself was never staged by Meyerhold, the idea of borrowing the principles of commedia dell'arte in the struggle against Stanislavsky's naturalistic theater for a time became a central strategy in the practice of Meyerhold himself and his followers."[34] In 1917, Meyerhold attempted to draw Prokofiev's attention to the text by handing the composer a copy of the journal and even shared his idea of the possibility of writing an opera—an idea he had been nurturing since 1913.

Russian scholar Julia Galanina, based on numerous archival documents, reconstructs in detail the history of the opera's creation, beginning with Meyerhold's recommendation that Prokofiev take up this subject—the composer wrote about it in his diaries. In 1918, having left Russia, Prokofiev began working on the opera; that same year he entered negotiations with the Chicago Opera Association. Having decided to rework the plot he completely "forgot" to mention Meyerhold, referring to only a single author—Carlo Gozzi, whom he read in the original provided by Alexandre Benois.[35] The reaction of Meyerhold and his colleagues to the Chicago performance of 1921 and to the absence of their names on the program is unknown, but after the productions of 1926–1927 in the Soviet Union the co-authors were not merely outraged but even initiated legal action against Prokofiev. Letters discovered by Julia Galanina in several Russian archives vividly reflect the indignation of Meyerhold and Solovyov, as well as their consultations with lawyers and detailed analyses of specific borrowings. However, since the opera was published in Germany and Prokofiev did not return to the USSR until 1936, the proceedings ended with no result, and the copyright issue remained unresolved.

It is possible that in the future Prokofiev might have acknowledged the true source of the opera's origin, but in 1952, when the American critic Olin Downes asked the Soviet composer—then living in the USSR and subjected to persecution[36]—what had inspired him to choose such an unusual operatic subject,

[32] see Introduction – in *Three Loves for Three Oranges. Gozzi, Meyerhold, Prokofiev*. Edited by Dassia N. Posner and Kevin Bartig with Maria De Simone. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 27.

[33] "Liubov' k trem apel'sinam," *Zhurnal doktora Dapertutto* ("Love for Three Oranges," *Doctor Dapertutto's Journal*). no. 1, (1914): 18–47.

[34] Frolova-Walker, 182.

[35] Julia Galanina, "From divertissement to opera. Two Russian oranges," in *Three Loves for Three Oranges*, 253-269, 256

[36] In February 1948, the Central Committee of VKP(b) issued a resolution titled "On the Opera 'The Great Friendship' by V. Muradeli," in which Soviet composers Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Myaskovsky, Popov, Shebalin, and Khachaturian were subjected to harsh criticism for "formalism." A number of Prokofiev's works were banned from performance.

Prokofiev merely referred to a certain "contemporary theatrical journal that published Gozzi's play," clearly fearing to mention the name of Meyerhold, who had been executed and excluded from Soviet artistic life.[37] When the director was later rehabilitated, the composer was no longer alive, and thus the story of The Three Oranges remained shrouded in secrecy until the 2020s.

It is unknown whether Komissarzhevsky was aware of this background. Most likely, he read Meyerhold's journal and certainly saw his productions before the revolution. But fate played a cruel joke on him as well. Judging by the correspondence with Victor Seroff published below, the director once again decided to revise Prokofiev's libretto—the co-authors actively exchanged texts, but then Seroff appropriated sole authorship, excluding Komissarzhevsky and even attempting to explain to him that the director had hardly participated in the work on the text. The translation was described by the contemporary American musicologist Kevin Bartig as "puzzlingly loose."[38] Seroff, later referring in his biography of Prokofiev to the translation he himself had made, sought to legitimize it by calling it a paraphrase rather than a translation, and that the numerous cuts were allegedly motivated by his desire to bring the text closer to Gozzi's original. Thus, not only Meyerhold but also Komissarzhevsky disappeared from the text.

Komissarzhevsky and opera

Starting from 1915, Komissarzhevsky turned to the opera genre—his first production at Zimin's Theater was Borodin's ***Prince Igor***, which received mixed reviews in the press.[39] He also dreamed of staging a comic opera—in one of his letters to Zimin, he mentioned ***The Tales of Hoffmann.***[40] After that, one opera followed one another.

After moving abroad, in the 1920s and 1930s, he staged quite a few operatic performances in Europe, but he dreamed of America, as he mentioned in a letter to the artist Sudeikin, who had settled there and could potentially help the director through his connections in theatrical circles. In 1925, Fyodor Fyodorovich still harbored illusions about America, not having received enough recognition in England (which came later, in the 1930s).

> "This work (there is nothing to do here in opera)[41] interests me a lot. Maybe it is something to live on for a while in the beginning. And then I'll figure it out. If only there was a non-compromising job at the start... In Europe, I have worked in England, Paris, and Vienna—drama, opera, and ballet. In

At the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Composers in 1948, Boris Asafyev and Tikhon Khrennikov spoke out against Prokofiev.

[37] Kevin Bartig, "Oranges in Leningrad by Sergei Prokofiev," in *Three Loves*, 409.

[38] Kevin Bartig, "Oranges in Leningrad," in *Three Loves*, 408.

[39] V. Borovskii, *Moskovskaia opera S. I. Zimina* (*Moscow Opera of S. I. Zimin*) (Moscow: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1977), 156–160.

[40] Komissarzhevskii, *Ya i Teatr*, 261.

[41] By "here" he means Europe.

> London, opera at Covent Garden; in Paris, opera at Champs Elysées, etc."[42]

He characterized the theatrical situation in European cities as deplorable:

> "Europe—that is, the countries where I have worked until now—is a wonderful place, but the culture here is decaying, especially theater. And I want to leave it all."[43]

Since in the 1920s the director still held illusions about the USSR as well, corresponding with officials about his return, he wrote in the same letter:

> "Perhaps there are only two countries with hope—Russia and America. Going to the first for reasons of gluttony (terrible that one must think about this!) is frightening. The second is very expensive—you need capital, and there's none."[44]

He explained his request by the fact that he had already tried to get a contract at the Metropolitan Opera but had no success:

> "By the way, officially, nothing can be done with the Met Opera this season. I have already 'negotiated' with O. Kan and Gatti-Casazza. So officially, don't bother them, dear. It's useless."[45]

Nevertheless, he did move to America in the 1930s and got the opportunity to stage operas, albeit not at the Metropolitan, but in a promising new project, the New York City Opera. From 1946 to 1952, his name appears in all the theater's printed materials.[46]

Life magazine wrote about his production of ***The Love for Three Oranges*** in October 1950, but the review was quite short and mostly dedicated to Prokofiev and his tragic fate in the Soviet Union. However, it was accompanied by beautiful color photos showing fragments of the performance with commentary.[47]

Collaboration with Victor Seroff – a view through Harvard letters

A large part of Victor Seroff's letters, preserved in the Harvard archive, is devoted to the discussion of the opera ***The Love for Three Oranges***, although another project is mentioned, possibly Pushkin's tales, as well as a play—presumably based on Dostoevsky's story ***Uncle's Dream***—which

[42] Komissarzhevskii, *Ya i Teatr*, 267.
[43] Ibid., 266.
[44] Komissarzhevskii, *Ya i Teatr*, 267.
[45] Ibid
[46] Sokol, 236-271.
[47] "The Love for Three Oranges: A Slaphappy Fairy Tale Makes a Smash-Hit Opera," *Life*, 29, no. 14 (October 2, 1950): 79-81. https://books.google.ca/books?id=9ksEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

Komissarzhevsky never staged because he suffered several more heart attacks and died in 1954. Moreover, he probably did not want to collaborate with Seroff anymore. Borovsky's biography does not mention none of these projects, although the author repeatedly emphasizes that Komissarzhevsky dreamed of staging not only Chekhov in America but also Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and possibly Pushkin.

According to Seroff's letters, the work on the text (or rather joint work with Komissarzhevsky) was almost completed by August 1949, with only the final touches and approvals remaining.

Archive staff forming the folder with letters suggest that Seroff's very first letter to Komissarzhevsky was sent on August 4, 1949, the second on November 22 of the same year, followed by several undated letters, though logically the order seems disturbed. One undated letter placed after the first two was clearly written much earlier—perhaps one or two years before. The simplest confirmation is the author's location: if on August 4, 1949, Seroff wrote from his home in New York, then in the undated letter he states he is in Europe and cannot return before September—most likely summer 1948 or even 1947. In that letter, Seroff gives his address in France and asks Komissarzhevsky how he is doing in New York, where in 1949 Fyodor Fyodorovich was absent because he was in England and returned home to Connecticut only on September 1.[48] From 1946, he indeed worked in New York—starting from September, he regularly staged operas at the New York City Opera.[49]

From another undated letter by Seroff, written in an unknown summer (in July), it becomes known that he was traveling in California (San Francisco and Hollywood), where he not only worked in a library but also met conductor Leopold Stokowski,[50] who was there in the summer of 1948, resting at his home after a US tour. In 1947 and 1949, the conductor toured Europe all summer.[51]

Most likely, negotiations on joint projects between Komissarzhevsky and Seroff began in the summer of 1947, continued in 1948, and by the summer of 1949, work on the libretto of Prokofiev's opera was underway. But this is only a hypothesis to be confirmed.

According to the letter of August 4, 1949, Seroff was urgently finishing the translation of Prokofiev's opera libretto under contract with City Center and the

[48] Borovsky, 452.

[49] See Annals in Sokol, 1944-1981: 236, 239, 241, 244, 247, 250, 253, 271. Komissarzhevsky is mentioned as one of the directors of the New York City Opera from 1946 through 1952 (spring 1952 being the last mention). Borovsky, in Komissarzhevsky's biography, does not mention his 1952 production (the opera Wozzeck).

[50] Leopold Stokowski (1882–1977) was a British and American conductor. In 1945–1946, he headed the Hollywood Bowl Symphony Orchestra. In the late 1940s, he worked as a guest conductor with the New York Philharmonic, and in 1949–1950 he co-led it together with Dimitris Mitropoulos. He frequently performed works by Russian and Soviet composers, many of them for the first time in the United States. In 1958, he toured the Soviet Union. In 1949, he conducted the premiere performance of Prokofiev's Sixth Symphony.

[51] Oliver Daniel, *Stokowsky: A Counterpoint of View* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1982), 520, 522

publisher Boosey & Hawkes.[52] Since he complains about having done the work in a very short time, one can conclude that he spent the summer of 1949 in New York (and the letter was sent from there).

There are also signs suggesting that correspondence began earlier, although archivists indicate only the period 1949–1950 on the folder cover. In particular, in one undated letter, Victor Ilyich does not yet mention the opera libretto, which in 1949 was being thoroughly discussed by the co-authors, but only asks Komissarzhevsky about possible cooperation such as writing a play. By indirect hints, it can be guessed that this is either a play based on Pushkin's tales or on Dostoevsky's story (though the authors planned to deal with Dostoevsky after Prokofiev's opera as well). However, the material is clearly insufficient, and the letters are rather fragmentary.

The author dares to suggest that the undated letter, located in the archive after the first two letters (August and November 1949), was written two years earlier, in 1947, and sent from a village in the French mountains, Villers-sur-Tour. In it, Victor Ilyich mentions his adventures related to arranging his personal life—"kidnapping" a woman from Czechoslovakia and taking her to France, where they are waiting for American documents for her.[53] The letter contains little concrete information about joint projects, but importantly, from it, we can infer the relationship between the future co-authors: Seroff shares some quite adventurous details of his life with Komissarzhevsky, demonstrating their friendship and even asking the director for a few favors. Judging by the beginning of the letter, Komissarzhevsky had read some of Seroff's texts and expressed remarks, which Victor Ilyich intended to take into account.

Seroff also mentions an upcoming trip to Nice, associated with many memories of his stay there with Isadora Duncan, not the most pleasant ones. It was in Nice that he provoked the dancer's jealousy with long seclusion with a female acquaintance of his, after which Isadora nearly committed suicide.[54] He left Nice on the eve of her death, and she felt betrayed and abandoned.[55] But, of course, Seroff omits this chapter of his biography, referring only to a forthcoming meeting with musicologist, Russian émigré Leonid Sabaneev, living in France.

An interesting detail—Victor Ilyich asks Komissarzhevsky how to send a package to the USSR—apparently, he wanted to send someone his book about Shostakovich. A copy with Seroff's autograph is kept at the Rudomino Library of Foreign Literature in Moscow. It was gifted to the Soviet diplomat Vladimir Ivanovich Bazykin,[56] mentioned by the author among others in the

[52] Publishing house specialized on sheet music.

[53] According to Jeanne Bresciani, Seroff had four wives. In Shostakovich's biography, written earlier and published in 1943, Seroff mentions a wife named Katherine.

[54] P. Kurth, *Isadora. A Sensational Life* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 531-532.

[55] Sewell Stokes, *Isadora Duncan: An Intimate Portrait* (London: Brentano's, 2013 [1928]), 45, 108.

[56] Vladimir Ivanovich Bazykin was a Soviet diplomat. From 1940 to 1945, he served as Second Secretary of the Plenipotentiary Mission—the Embassy of the USSR in the United States.

"Acknowledgments" section. The composer's aunt, Nadezhda Galli-Shohat,[57] was a co-author in writing the book—her autograph is also present in the dedication. However, it is quite possible that Victor Ilyich presented the book to Bazykin in the USA, where he worked at the Plenipotentiary Mission-Embassy in the 1940s, and intended to send other copies to the USSR.

The composer and musicologist Leonid Sabaneev, who emigrated from the USSR in 1926 and settled in France (since 1933 had lived in Nice), published several books about composers in the 1920s in Russian, and two of them later became subjects of Seroff's English-language biographies—Ravel and Debussy. As Seroff admits in his book on Shostakovich, he drew much of his material from communicating with experts, so Sabaneev might have given him ideas for further work. Moreover, the English translation of Sabaneev's essays on Russian composers showed Seroff that there was interest in this topic in the USA but very little information, since the essays in the book contained only basic facts and some comments.[58] Thus, the letter placed in folder under the number three, I publish first.

> Dear Fyodor Fyodorovich!
>
> I received your letter and took note of it, as they say. So, we will write the play when I return to New York[59], but when will I return? I'm afraid it will not be before September. The thing is, although I have not yet been arrested here in Prague [as of today]… I must confess to you… I got married to Elena (?)[60] and… imagine that I somehow managed to get her out of Prague. How and by what means is another matter, and I will tell you about it when I see you – but I did get her out, and according to all the rules of the law, <illegible> to say – but without going into details. Of course, I won't go back to Prague anymore, but while I am waiting for an American visa for my wife, I will be in France. Tomorrow I'm going to Nice for a few days. I want to see L. Sabaneev. Then I will return here. What are you doing this summer? From your handwriting, it's clear you can't stand writing letters, but still, scribble me a few words about how things are going for you in New York, and, by the way, send me the address of a company or store that sends niche (?) packages to Soviet Russia. I promised to send a couple of

[57] Nadezhda Galli-Shokhat, Shostakovich's aunt, was a physicist. She began teaching in Siberia at the Ural Federal University. In 1923, she moved to the United States with her second husband and taught at a number of American universities – see *Abilene Reporter-News*. Abilene, Texas. Sun, Jul 23, 1944. p. 46, https://www.newspapers.com/article/abilene-reporter-news-shostakovichs-aun/57814622/

[58] L. Sabaneev, *Modern Russian Composers*, transl. by Judah A. Joffe. (New York, London: International Publishers, 1927). Sabaneev begins the book by stating that Russia's musical life is terra incognita for the contemporary Western readers – p. 11.

[59] It is not clear which play he refers to.

[60] The name is written illegibly, and there is no information about this woman, just as there is none about Seroff's other wives.

packages, but I don't have the address of the store. Please be so kind as to write to me here. And if there is only your company's (?), then get the forms that need to be filled out and send them to me (only Air Mail), otherwise it will be Ro/medicine (?) by the time I get it. Always write to me at this address:

c/o Jean Roman
Willer sur Thur
Haut Rhin, France
Greetings to your family
Yours, Seroff

The next two letters are related to Seroff's trip to California. Most likely, they were written in the summer of 1948. He is still working on his book about the composers from Mighty Five group, published in 1948, plans to work in the university library in San Francisco, and also will have several meetings in Hollywood. Conductor Leopold Stokowski is mentioned, who was in the USA during the summer of 1948, including San Francisco and Beverly Hills. Since Stokowski was no longer in California in the summer of 1949 (he was touring Europe conducting various orchestras)[61], Seroff's letters were most likely written in 1948.

Dear Fyodor Fyodorovich!

By the time you receive my message, I will already be at the final stretch (the third (?)) of my exile.

On July 16, I am going to San Francisco, where I will stay until Saturday (the 21st). I want to dig into the library at the University – they say the whole library once belonged to Milyukov.[62] Then, from the 22nd, I will be in Hollywood. I would like to have your version of the Pushkin fairy tales with me so I can immediately discuss everything with Stokowski.[63] I wrote to you that he was interested in this idea and now he is waiting for me to continue. So, what about you, have you reconsidered or are you lazy?

From Drew Grild (?) I have received $50 so far.

I hope everything is fine.

Remember you once told me about Kruglikov – I found his article on Mussorgsky.[64]

[61] Daniel, 522.

[62] He may refer to the Hoover Institution at Stanford, although Milyukov's archive is housed at Columbia University in New York.

[63] Komissarzhevsky thought of staging Alexander Pushkin's writings, along with other Russian classic's literature of the 19th century (Turgenev, Tolstoy, Ostrovsky), in the mid-1940s—see Borovsky, 446. In two biographies of Stokowsky, there is not a single mention of any project related to Pushkin's fairy tales.

[64] It is likely referring to the article by Sem. Kruglikov, "Mussorgsky and His *Boris Godunov*," *Artist* no. 5, (1890).

> Here, I once met some Park A[…] <illegible>, who, without knowing who I am or what I am, said she was raising money last winter for a Russian opera for Mrs. Irion.[65] She says she scraped together $1200.
>
> Does Irion call you, saying you hung Igor[66] on a nail?
>
> Strangely enough, here I met the composer who wrote "Deep in the Heart of Texas"[67] and he offered me to write a musical play with music <illegible> Retro.
>
> There are more plots here than you can shake a stick at,[68] but I am still busy with my "Mighty Five."[69] Maybe on the way to Hollywood I will come up with something.All the best for now. Greet your wife and Tanya.[70]
>
> Don't be lazy. Write to me a few words now, because it's not <illegible> here. And send Air Mail, otherwise letters take ages.
>
> Yours, Seroff

From the next letter, it is clear that Seroff again discusses some projects with conductor Leopold Stokowski. Seroff was not only well acquainted with the conductor, but in 1945 even planned to write his biography, as evidenced by their correspondence published in Stokowski's biography by Oliver Daniels. However, at that time the conductor declined the proposal, joking that the most interesting part of his life could not be described, and what could be included in the biography was not interesting at all.[71] However, it seems Komissarzhevsky had already cooled down on the joint project he himself initiated and did not respond. The following letter begins with reproaches about the director's silence.

> Dear Fyodor Fyodorovich!
>
> Why are you stuck on <illegible> with some eternal

[65] It is most likely referring to Yolanda Mero-Irion, an American pianist of Hungarian origin who became a theatrical producer in the 1940s—see Sokol, 33. She led The New Opera Company from 1941. The company dissolved due to a lack of funding. As a pianist, Mero-Irion performed with renowned conductors, including Stokowski. Among Russian operas, the company staged Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* and Mussorgsky's *The Fair at Sorochyntsi*. The company collaborated with Russian émigré choreographers, including George Balanchine and Leonid Massine. It is possible that Seroff refers to events in New York that occurred before his trip to California.

[66] It may refer to Borodin's opera *Prince Igor*. However, there is no evidence that Komissarzhevsky planned to stage it in the United States. He did stage it in Russia in 1915 – see Komissarzhevsky. *Ya i teatr*, 277, and probably in England in 1919.

[67] The song "Deep in the Heart of Texas" was written by June Hershey and Don Swander in 1941 and soon became incredibly popular, performed by well-known singers.

[68] In Russian, the phrase sound quite rude – There are so many plots that you could feed pigs with them.

[69] Seroff published the book on the composers from the group "The Mighty Five" in 1948. In 1949 it was published in French, in 1968 – in German.

[70] Tanya Metaksa (born in 1936) – daughter of Komissarzhevsky and Stodel.

[71] Daniel, xxiv.

fermata? No word or sound from you, and Stokowski keeps asking me if I received a letter from you. Here you are – you started something and then disappeared from the face of the earth. He is quite interested in the idea and if I had something more concrete to show him, maybe something real could come out of it. He has a clever guy here who manages his affairs. But you keep silent. Well, what do you expect!

So, will you write what and how, or not?

Greetings to your family

Yours, V. Seroff

My address is on the back.

V. Seroff c/o Mrs. John Crown

1333 North Orange Grove

Hollywood, Cal

The next letter from Seroff was probably written from New York in the summer of 1949, which is evident because a specific project is discussed—the libretto of the opera *The Love for Three Oranges*, although this title does not appear. The letter shows emerging disagreements between co-authors, which have not yet escalated into an open conflict. Seroff's tone becomes tense – he is unhappy that the director does not understand the difference between a libretto and a play for dramatic theater, does not consider the convenience of the text for singers, and is also poorly acquainted with the peculiarities of American English (this is understandable because the director spent many years in England). Furthermore, the discussion already touches on the honorarium – Komissarzhevsky clearly reproached Seroff for receiving more, while Victor Ilyich argues the opposite. Also, according to contemporaries, Komissarzhevsky's character was quite difficult[72] – as seen from the letter, he constantly changed his decisions and proposed unrealistic ideas. Some phrases in Seroff's letter sound rather threatening – "What's wrong with you all of a sudden?"[73] ""Back and forth all the time,"[74] "a hodgepodge of words", "I will veto it", "nothing will come of it", etc. One thing is clear – there was Komissarzhevsky's manuscript that Seroff was rewriting or a draft of the translation first made by Seroff and later revised by his co-author. In short, the libretto work was done by both co-authors, and both received honorarium.

Undated letter – possibly summer 1949, New York

Dear Fyodor Fyodorovich!

I have just received your letter and must confess that its tone both surprised and offended me. What, tell me, bit you, as they say in Czech? And what's with this dictatorial "do it or else"[75]? And what benefits are you hinting at? Come on, I have

[72] Borovsky, 435.

[73] In Russian it sounds as "What wasp bit you?"

[74] He says in Russian – "Two Fridays in one week" although the Russian saying is "Seven Fridays a week."

[75] This is written in English

as much benefit from your production as you do, if not less. This also applies to the corrections and to the fact that when I wrote to you, I hadn't even seen the manuscript yet. I received it on Monday and reviewed it yesterday. I agree with most of them and can easily make changes, but there are <illegible> phrases and words that don't fit.

You seem to have forgotten, sir, that this is not a play—there is rhythm and accent here, and you're just clowning around; there are words that are hard to sing, and some that are unknown in America and won't be found in any dictionary. Even, my good sir, here are some!

I did the translation guided by your letters, and you have two Fridays in one week. First this way, then that way, then back to the old way. All of this should have been decided earlier before dictating to me. At first, you wanted your characters to speak pompously, and now you have some kind of hodgepodge. Sophisticated words mixed with 3rd Avenue.

You're also slacking off somewhere in "Boosey and Hawkes," and here I am expected to sit and work hard, and quickly too.

The City Center is calling us to the fire. And you're writing to some Broadway producers! What producers? We are the authors, and we have the rights. If you start messing up the language, I will veto it. So that's it, sir, and no hints about benefits will help you. Let's better be friendly about this. I am an easygoing person, but if you dictate, nothing will come of it. Send me the rest. But please write legibly. At the beginning of Act 3, I missed two phrases because I didn't know who was blowing into whose back. And don't forget that the "book"—the libretto—should read on its own with meaning, not like Stravinsky's music, in which without a picture or ballet nothing is clear.

Halasz wants to write everything into the score himself. Well, let him write it.

Change your favorite Kitchensneep (?)

This word is not known in America.

When you have to explain words – it's not good. It's hot here. I can't write more. All the best.

Yours, Seroff

And finally, the dated letters sent shortly before and after the premiere of Prokofiev's opera *The Love for Three Oranges* in New York – on August 4 and November 22.

In August 1949, Komissarzhevsky was still in England, where he had long wanted to be but, to his great disappointment, had received no contracts.

Seroff's letter was sent there, although the address is very hard to read. Between these two letters, many important events occurred: Komissarzhevsky's heart attack immediately after returning to the USA, his replacement by another director at the New York City Opera – Vladimir Rozing, the premiere, and finally the publication of the libretto without crediting his authorship. In the letter dated August 4, Seroff reports that he gave the libretto text to Halasz and no longer wants or can make any more changes, being busy with other matters and not considering the honorarium sufficient for revisions – it seems that Komissarzhevsky, as always, was unhappy and asked for something to be changed.

[Envelope]
V. Seroff
122 E. 92
NYC – 78

August 4, 1949

Dear Fyodor Fyodorovich,

Yesterday I delivered the entire opera to Halasz. They will reprint the text and send it to you.

I received your letter with corrections for the Prologue. I revised it except for two or three phrases that cannot be sung because of their acousts. As for the rest—the entire play—if you want to change everything again, I'm striking. I cannot redo the opera twice for $400 in such a short time.

That's why I suggested waiting for your return so we can discuss together what needs to be fixed. Don't be angry with me, but I simply cannot do it. To finish the opera, I sometimes worked until 3 or 4 a.m. and had to postpone two articles for *Town and Country* which I now must write. So physically, I cannot rewrite the opera.

As for the choruses—Halasz told me he knows everything himself. I tried to explain to him that all this is very complicated, but he didn't want to listen—says he knew everything himself. Now I don't even have a piano score.

Everything is with Halasz.

In two or three places, I didn't write the words (two or three phrases) because I didn't know what you wanted.

Halasz told me he wants to finish the opera with a march. I think that's good!

That's all for now. We have unbearable heat here. I haven't been to Darien,[76] but I spoke on the phone with Mrs. Komissarzhevsky.

[76] Darien is a town in Connecticut where Komissarzhevsky's family lived.

She didn't have time to finish the play. So, we'll have to wait for your arrival.

There is <illegible>

Yours, Seroff

T. Komissarzhevsky

Stad… Hotel

St. da..e place h… SW 1[77]

November 22, 1949

V. Seroff

122 E. 92

NYC – 78

Dear Fyodor Fyodorovich,

I've been thinking of writing to you for a long time but was terribly busy. I hope you have recovered and now we can meet and resolve the misunderstanding that happened this summer. I don't want to believe that we will be "at odds" over this trivial matter.

I haven't seen *The Oranges*, but my wife was delighted. Either call or drop me a postcard telling me when and where we can meet.

Respectfully yours,

<illegible>

Seroff

The next letter is written in a fairly friendly tone and again discusses a joint project—a play, but there's no information which one. That will become clear from later correspondence.

April 19, 1950 (registered mail)

Dear Fyodor Fyodorovich,

I called your studio. When I got through, someone said you don't come to the theater. Then I called your home and spoke with Tanya. I don't know if she passed on the message or forgot. I wanted to talk to you about our play. If you don't want to write it, please send me my draft — I'll try to make it myself from the draft.

My wife was ill all winter. I was too. But now we've recovered. How is your health? Regards to you from us.

Yours, Seroff

Three days later, on April 22, Fyodor Fyodorovich answered Seroff, apparently sharply recalling Seroff's inappropriate attitude toward his work and

[77] The address is written very illegibly, but it seems that Komissarzhevsky was still in England.

the absence of Komissarzhevsky's name in the libretto of Prokofiev's opera, as indicated by the phrase about "nonsense regarding your participation in my authorship of the translation of *Love for Three Oranges*," and this seems to be the first time Komissarzhevsky openly asserts this, referring to the theater's error in the contract. Seroff, being quite temperamental, responded even more sharply, switching not only to English and typing his letter but also changing the tone from friendly to formal, addressing his co-author as "Dear Mr. Komissarzhevsky" instead of "Dear Fyodor Fyodorovich." It finally becomes clear that the discussed play was Dostoevsky's *Uncle's Dream.* The sensitive issue of the authorship of the libretto of Prokofiev's opera is raised again.

> Dear Mr. Komissarzhevsky -
>
> I am writing you this letter in English so that we both can have the facts on record to avoid any misunderstanding in the future.
>
> From your letter of April 22, I understand that you are going to write by yourself a play based on Dostoevsky' s story "Uncle's Dream". As you remember we originally worked together on this idea as a cooperative enterprise, to which you yourself referred in your letters as "our play". Since we both have equal rights in it I consider myself free to write my own version.
>
> However, in order to avoid any confusion I suggest that we should make now some kind of arrangement in case one of our plays should be produced. If this is not agreeable to you, I will take it that you assert no claim on anything I do. However, I reserve my rights in the matter, should your play be produced.
>
> To the best of my knowledge I returned all your material to you when I gave you the first draft of my translation of Dostoevsky's story. However, should I find any additional material among my papers, you can rest assured that I will at once send it back to you.
>
> And now what is all this nonsense about your having any part in my authorship of the translation of "The Love for Three Oranges"? You must admit that this is the first time that you have ever mentioned it to me. In all our correspondence and in all of our conversations you never before made any claim for a share of my author's rights. I did the translation of "The Love for Three Oranges" under contract with both the City Center and Boosey and Hawkes, the publishers of the score of the opera. You will undoubtedly recall that you wrote me several letters in which you stated that all the author's rights belong to me, that your rights are solely of a stage-director, and finally, in your own words you told the reasons why I was invited by the City Center to be the author of the said translation.

As far as I know you were the stage-director for the planned performances of the opera, working under contract with the City Center. If the City Center has "cheated" you, as you say in your letter, I do not see how I can help you.

Sincerely,
Victor Seroff

Kommissarzhevsky's response is also typed in English on his personal letterhead. The director emphasizes that he does not intend to take legal action, but the word "nonsense" clearly offended him, since he not only initiated *The Love for Three Oranges* (and possibly even recommended Seroff as his co-author, with whom he had previously begun collaborating on another project), but also worked extensively on the libretto. The tone of the letter is extremely sharp, and it is obvious that Fyodor Fyodorovich is putting an end to their relationship, despite his stated willingness to "consider" the possibility of further cooperation after receiving an official request from Seroff.

Handwritten: Registered. Return receipt <illegible>

May 1st, 1950

Dear Seroff,

You wrote me in English to place the matter on a "legal" basis. I am answering in English too, but just out of courtesy. I don't propose starting any kind of litigation with you.

As to the "Love 'tor Three Orange ", if you consider the book of the City Center version as of your own intention and of your own translation, well… I prefer then not to talk about "all this nonsense", as you are calling it.

Dostoyevsky's works are free for anyone to translate, adapt or dramatize, and there are very many dramatic adaptations all over the world of almost each of his major works (including "The Uncle's Dream"). So you and I have each the right to dramatize "Uncle's Dream" or base a play upon the canvas of the novel. It you wish to make some kind of arrangement about the proposed plays, please send me a letter to this effect: I am prepared to consider it.

I will be obliged if you would return my draft of the first act of my own version of the play to me.

As to your remarks about my relationship to the City Center and their "cheating me", you are misinformed about my contract, etc., and I've never used the word "cheating" in my letters (Russian) to you.

Yours sincerely,
[no signature]

Komissarzhevsky was able to realize several more projects—he staged Shakespeare's play *Cymbeline* in Canada for the Montreal Festival of Music and Drama in July 1950 and began working on a book about the art of directing,[78] as he mentioned in a letter to the writer and innovative theater director Nikolai Evreinov,[79] who was also an active participant in pre-revolutionary theatrical life and now lived in Paris. Fyodor Fyodorovich wrote also the play *The Sweet Content*, dreaming of its production in England, but received a reply from his ex-wife, actress Peggy Ashcroft, stating that it was impossible to stage it.[80] In 1952, he realized his last opera production at the New York City Opera—Berg's *Wozzeck.*[81]

A crack in his family life due to a new infatuation with his young female student, growing irritation with America, attempts to move back to England, and another heart attack—all this distracted Komissarzhevsky both from the "disputes" over the authorship of the opera libretto and from his work on *Uncle's Dream*—this play is not mentioned either in Borovsky's biography or anywhere else. Four years after the last letter, in 1954, Komissarzhevsky died.

Victor Seroff continued his successful career at the intersection of musicology and biographical genre, outliving his outstanding collaborator by more than two decades—he died in 1979 at the age of 77. Despite being considered an honest and noble man, as told to the author by the Duncan dancer and scholar Jeanne Bresciani, this correspondence rather suggests the opposite—Seroff's actions do not seem honorable, although he may have had his reasons and justifications. Fyodor Fyodorovich, on the other hand, behaved quite nobly, not engaging in petty quarrels and not trying to defend his rights—the scale of his personality compelled him to move forward, to large new projects, of which he realized more than enough in his life to remain in the history of theater.

Interestingly, it became possible to revive innovations from Russian theater of the 1910s in the United States in 1949 (including ironic pantomime, elements of commedia dell'arte and performance art, the embodiment of the idea of total theater involving audience members). In the USSR, none of these innovations took root, as socialist realism was dominant and further experimentation was not possible.

And "*The Love for Three Oranges"* at the New York City Opera, undeservedly forgotten for more than half a century, has finally returned to scholarly attention, although some mysteries behind its production remain to be solved.

[78] Borovsky, 455.

[79] Nikolai Evreinov (1879-1953)—a Russian director, dramatist and theatre practitioner, theorist of theater and philosopher.

[80] Ibid

[81] Sokol, 272.

About the Author:
Elena Yushkova (Iushkova), PhD in Art History (Candidate of Sciences), currently a Visiting Scholar at the University of Kentucky. Elena is the author of two Russian-language monographs and has published more than sixty academic articles in Russian and foreign academic journals, collective monographs, and conference proceedings. Her English-language book *Revolutionary Dancer in Revolutionary Russia: Isadora Duncan and Russian Culture* is released by CEU Press in 2026. She is a recipient of two Fulbright academic fellowships. Her studies focus on the legacy of the American dancer Isadora Duncan (1877-1927), Russian interpretative theater and American modern dance.