



Tovarich

by
Jacques Deval
adapted by
Robert Sherwood

Know-the-Show Audience Guide

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The Playwright: *Jacques Deval*



Jacques Deval (Source: Association de la Régie Théâtrale).

Jacques Deval was a prolific and popular French playwright and author. Born in 1890 in Paris as Jacques Boularan de Cambajoux, Deval was the son of a doctor-turned-actor.

Deval was drafted into the army in 1912, but extreme nearsightedness put him in the auxiliary service and off the front lines for most of World War I. After the war, he continued his studies in literature but transferred schools continually because of unruly behavior.

Deval's first foray into the world of letters was a book of verse published in 1919. His first play, *Une Faible Femme*, met with great critical success a year later and launched a period of fervent though uneven theatrical production. A versatile writer, Deval experimented with many different styles, including vaudevillean comedy (*Beauté*, 1923), psychological analysis (*Le Bien-Aimé*, 1924), sentimental comedy (*La Rose de Septembre*, 1926), and political satire (*Barricou*, 1929). Influential director

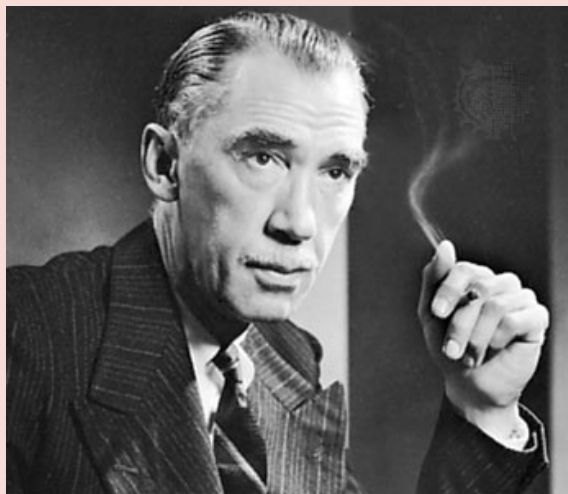
Jacques Copeau wrote of Deval that he combined a passionate interest in realism, Shakespeare, and Dostoevsky with an enthusiasm for light comedy and cinematic techniques. Several of Deval's most successful plays, including *Tovaritch* (1933, spelled with the 't' in French editions), give a comic treatment to an underlying tragic situation. For example, *Mademoiselle* (1932) is a comedy yet deals with a young girl who nearly commits suicide because of her out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

With a creative output spanning almost 50 years, Deval wrote approximately 40 original plays, ten theatrical adaptations, and ten books, and participated in six films, both in France and the U.S. His plays were adapted for foreign audiences by the likes of Robert Sherwood and P. G. Wodehouse. Despite his skill and success, Deval once claimed to "detest" the theatre, the audience, and the actors who "deform[ed]" his plays, and worried that his work would "harm [his] salvation." He would move on from a play days before it even opened, thereby avoiding getting caught up in its success or failure. Instead of attending dress rehearsals, he would see a different play or go out with friends.

Deval was fond of women (he was married five times) and travel (he occasionally took off for another country while neglecting to pay his taxes), but shunned ostentation and self-promotion – possibly accounting for his fade in prominence. He died in Paris in 1972 at the age of 82.



The Adapter: Robert Sherwood



Robert E. Sherwood, in a photograph by Yousuf Karsh (Source: Encyclopædia Britannica).

One of the most recognized literary figures of the twentieth century, Robert E. Sherwood (1896-1955) was an American playwright whose work emphasized the role of personal sacrifice in times of war and peace.

In 1917, Sherwood dropped out of Harvard to enlist in Canada's Black Watch Battalion, and served in France. His experiences in WWI, which included sustaining multiple injuries, left him disillusioned and opposed to war. After his discharge, Sherwood became the drama editor of *Vanity Fair* (1919-1920). He also worked for *Life* and *Scribner's*, and was a founding member of the Algonquin Round Table.

Sherwood's first success as a playwright came in 1927 with

Road to Rome, an anti-war satire about Hannibal's crossing of the Alps. Much of Sherwood's early work focused on the futility of war, but his outrage over events in Europe as WWII approached led him to become more politically engaged. In 1940, Sherwood became Franklin D. Roosevelt's speech writer and subsequently the head of the overseas branch of the Office of War Information.

Sherwood won the Pulitzer Prize for three of his most notable theatrical works, *Idiot's Delight* (1936), *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1938), and *There Shall Be No Night* (1940). In 1946, he wrote the screenplay for *The Best Years of Our Lives*, which won seven Academy Awards. He was also nominated for an Oscar for his screenplay of the film *Rebecca*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock. In 1949, Sherwood received a fourth Pulitzer Prize, this time in the biography category for his book Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History.

He died of a heart attack in 1955 in New York City, at the age of 60.



Clark Gable and Norma Shearer in the 1939 film version of *Idiot's Delight* (Credit: MGM).

Tovarich

An Introduction

Tovarich is a comedy of manners, disguise, and revelation, thrown into relief by its foundation in the tragic aspects of the Russian Revolution. A rags-to-riches tale in reverse where happiness is to be found in the rags rather than the riches, Tovarich is a rich and complex piece of skilled drama whose weightier aspects have historically been undervalued. As director Bonnie J. Monte writes in her director's notes, "For all its froth, [Tovarich] is a piece of work that contains a plethora of what we are seeing all around us everywhere in the world. It deals with revolution, exile, homelessness, poverty, greed, class struggles, prejudice, the plight of the working class, oil, torture, entitlement, and with the quest for wealth, power, and domination. It also portrays people who have courage, loyalty, perseverance, pluck, humility, generosity, intelligence, a moral center, and the ability to learn and change. It depicts choices that demand tolerance, compromise, balance, reason, and compassion. ...Tovarich's central couples find hope, promise and happiness."



Tsar Nicholas II, whom Prince Ouratieff would have served, with the army (Source: Open Library).

not to spoil to plot, consider skipping this section.

Tovarich opens with Prince Mikail Alexandrovitch Ouratieff and his wife, Grand Duchess Tatiana Pétrovna. Both Russian nobility, they have fled Russia after the Revolution of 1917 and are now living in Paris. As former General of Cavalry and aide-de-camp to the late Tsar, Mikail was entrusted with the task of protecting nearly four billion francs worth of gold (the equivalent today of \$12 billion USD) to be used only for the "best interests of [his]

sovereign," and he therefore refuses to touch one sou until the right time and circumstances arise. Mikail and Tatiana are living a life of poverty in a run-down hotel room. Deeply in love with each other and equally stoic regarding their situation, they have been sustaining themselves through frugal living, gradual selling off of possessions, and Tatiana's occasional pilfering of groceries.

While Tatiana is out "buying" food, Mikail receives a visit from Monsieur Chauffourier-Dubieff, Governor of the Bank of France, and Count Brekenski, aide-de-camp to the current pretender to the Russian throne. They try to convince Mikail to convert the gold to French government bonds, but he refuses. Chauffourier-Dubieff reveals that the French government has been paying the bills for the couple's stolen produce.

Tatiana returns with flowers, caviar, and champagne, in addition to her usual "purchases," but news of the French government's

Please note: Below is a full summary of the play. If you prefer



“treacherous charity” is so upsetting that the regal couple resolves to seek work in order to survive. However, none of their ideas – taxi driver, Russian dancer, model – seem feasible.

Just then, a neighbor by the name of Martelleau arrives, collecting money for a poor, starving woman and her newborn baby. The Russians have no money left, but Tatiana gives him all their food. From Martelleau they learn of a job opportunity for a married couple to be servants in an upper class French household. Remembering their time in service to the Tsar, they write themselves a reference, pack up what few possessions they still own, and set off to present themselves for the position.

At the Dupont house, Fernande and Charles Dupont are in such dire need of new servants that they are ready to hire just about anyone. Mikail and Tatiana (now in disguise as Michel and Tina), despite giving an odd first impression, are hired on the spot. They gradually prove their worth to all members of the household, including the spoiled children, Georges and Hélène. Mikail cures Charles’s headache and coaches Georges on his fencing technique; Tatiana flusters Charles with her Russian etiquette (including the “kiss of forgiveness”) and tunes Hélène’s guitar; and they both intrigue the family with their regal bearing, exotic Russian character, and devotion to each other. Georges and Hélène go from snootily dismissing the foreigners to avidly learning Russian and begging to attend a Russian party.

This ideal situation is threatened when the Duponts host a dinner

to be attended by Commissar Gorotchenko, who, unbeknownst to the Duponts, had imprisoned and tortured Mikail and Tatiana back in Russia. Mikail and Tatiana serve at the dinner but are recognized by Madame Van Hemert, another guest. Charles and Fernande feel they have been made fools of and resolve to dismiss their high-born servants.

While Tatiana is washing dishes in the kitchen, Gorotchenko enters. Despite being sworn enemies, Gorotchenko has come to ask for their closely guarded four billion francs. The French, English, Dutch, and Americans – represented by the other dinner guests – are out to buy rich oil fields from the new Soviet government. Gorotchenko is resisting this infringement on Russian soil, but he must obtain that sum of money or condemn millions of peasants to starvation. Realizing that, if the Tsar and Russia are one, then keeping Russia whole and her people fed is serving the best interests of the Tsar, Mikail and Tatiana agree to sign over the money. Gorotchenko promises to mark the oil fields on the map in the Tsar’s former room with the Romanoff flag. In the course of the encounter, Mikail realizes that the old Russia exists now only within their hearts, souls, and memories.

Georges and Hélène enter, ready to head off to the Russian party. They are interrupted by Charles, who, having thought the matter over with his wife, relents and asks Mikail and Tatiana to stay on in the Dupont household. With a place and a purpose, Mikail and Tatiana find their own form of happiness – and a future for themselves in their much changed world.





Tovarich

Who's Who

MIKAÏL ALEXANDROVITCH OURATIEFF – Russian prince, General of the Tsar's Cavalry, and husband of Grand Duchess Tatiana Pétrovna. The deposed Tsar entrusted Mikail with gold worth four billion francs for safekeeping, making Mikail an object of much attention from bankers and government officials.

TATIANA PÉTROVNA – a Russian Grand Duchess, wife of Prince Ouratieff, and cousin to Tsar Nicholas Romanov II.

OLGA – ostensibly a shop girl delivering a hat, but actually a spy for the new Soviet regime.

MONSIEUR CHAUFFOURIER-DUBIEFF – Governor of the Bank of France who tries to convince Prince Ouratieff to convert the Tsar's gold into government bonds.

COUNT FÉODOR BREKENSKI – aide-de-camp to the current pretender to the Russian throne. He believes that Mikail should use the late Tsar's money to support a counter-revolution.

MARTELLEAU – out-of-work valet, and neighbor to Tatiana and Mikail in Act One. He solicits their support for a poor woman

who just gave birth and is starving.

FERNANDE DUPONT – wife to Charles Dupont; mother to Georges and Hélène. Initially reluctant to hire Mikail and Tatiana, she, like the rest of the Duponts, soon grows fond of them.

CHARLES DUPONT – a middle-aged, wealthy businessman and the head of the Dupont household.

LOUISE – the cook for the Dupont household.

GEORGES DUPONT – twenty-year-old son of the Duponts. He is spoiled and snobbish, and fond of fencing and playing poker. He falls in love with Tatiana.

HÉLÈNE DUPONT – eighteen-year-old daughter of the Duponts, and spoiled like her brother. She in turn falls in love with Mikail.

MADAME VAN HEMERT – a powerful businesswoman who represents the Anglo-Dutch interest in the petrol discussions with the Russians.

MADAME CHAUFFOURIER-DUBIEFF – the wife of Monsieur Chauffourier-Dubieff.

COMMISSAR GOROTCHENKO – a major player in the new Soviet regime, Gorotchenko was once the chief of the Investigating Staff at Tcheka who imprisoned and tortured Tatiana and Mikail.



Quotable:

FOREIGNERS ON RUSSIAN CUSTOMS

HONOR WITH VODKA: Each lady had to sip a cup of vodka in honor of each of the ambassadors, then hand it over and bow to him. The Russians consider it the greatest honor they can pay a guest to show him in this manner that he has been agreeable and welcome. – *Adam Olearius, Holsteinian diplomat (1647)*

DARE TO REFUSE A KISS: The custom of saluting and kissing admits of no distinction of rank or lot in life, of no remembrance of quarrels. If the red egg be offered, no magnate will refuse the solicited kiss to the vilest of the populace, no matron will excuse herself through modesty, no maiden out of bashfulness; it would be held a sin either to reject the proffered egg or reject the kiss. – *Johann Georg Korb, Austrian diplomat (1700)*

KISSES FOR EVERY OCCASION: [T]he people [in Russian Poland] did more kissing in the same space of time than in any other part of the world...They seem to have a kiss appropriate to every emotion. I noticed a young lady rush into the arms of an old lady and passionately kiss her upon the left shoulder again and again. One gentleman partly knelt and kissed the hand of a lady, while others kissed in

true American style. I often saw men kissing each other. One man before leaving the train, with much show of affection kissed six men who came to bid him good-bye. Each special kind of kiss had its peculiar meaning! Kissing is governed somewhat by caste, an inferior kissing a superior in a prescribed way. Equals have their significant kiss, while relatives and families kiss also according to custom. – *George C. Bartlett (1892)*

RUSSIAN HOSPITALITY: A Russian police office is compelled, *nolens volens*, to suspect the stranger on principle; but approach him genially, drink tea or vodka with him, the social heart that beats universal in the Russian breast is touched, and he is yours, believing in you, confiding in you for the time, though he may grow suspicious again after you are gone. – *Thomas Stevens, New York journalist (1901)*

ABOUT THESE PASSAGES

Jacques Deval's depictions of Russian customs, such as frequent kissing and vodka-drinking, were based on common perceptions and stereotypes of Russians by other Europeans and Americans. These passages are the kinds of first-hand observations that informed such perceptions.





Explore Online

Color photographs from early 20th-century Russia at the Library of Congress, offering a vivid glimpse of the world left behind by the characters in *Tovarich*: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/empire/>



The British Museum's collection of Russian icons, complete with historical and cultural background: http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/online_research_catalogues/russian_icons/catalogue_of_russian_icons.aspx



"Russia's Great War & Revolution," an ongoing scholarly project leading up to the centennial of WWI, including archive sources and multimedia content: <http://russiasgreatwar.org>



The Russian Revolution

Russia entered World War I in 1914 as part of the Allied forces. However, severe mismanagement of the war effort – low supplies, soldiers sent into battle without guns – soon crippled its army and bred dissension and unrest among troops and civilians alike. The Russian Empire would suffer over two million military casualties in the war and over one million additional deaths from famine and disease.

Three years into WWI, workers began a massive strike that led to the closing of many factories. On February 25, 1917, Tsar Nicholas II invoked the use of military force to end the demonstrations. Instead of attacking the workers, the soldiers and many local police joined them in renouncing the old regime. Nicholas II abdicated his throne, and a provisional government was established. The new government did not fix the situation, however: national debt increased, labor wages decreased, and the food supply grew



A Red Army unit marching through Kharkov (Source: TIME/Getty).

dangerously short.

The continued hardships and unrest set the stage for further political turmoil. The Bolsheviks (communist revolutionaries under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin) gathered support following the February Revolution. By October, they were powerful enough to stage a coup. On October 24, 1917, the Bolsheviks began taking over government buildings and other strategic locations. Within days, and with very little bloodshed, what is now known as the October Revolution ended with the overtaking of the Emperor's Winter Palace on October 26.

A new congress was immediately formed, with Lenin at its helm. All opposition parties were promptly broken up and their leaders arrested. Thus began the Russian Civil War (1917-1922), pitting Lenin's "Red Russia" against the anti-Bolshevik forces, now known as "White Russia" (red being associated with communism and white with royalty of the Empire). Though the Whites

received generous aid from England, Canada, and the United States, the Red forces ultimately prevailed, with their "no cost is too great" loyalty to the revolution.



Lenin took drastic measures to stabilize his government, ordering the mass killing of all those in opposition. The extensive torture and murders, now known as the “Red Terror,” continued for over a month. Thousands of citizens disappeared or fled from the region during this period of time.

To ensure his party’s victory, Lenin also employed economic and social restructuring. He imposed “War Communism,” authorizing the government to seize crops from farmers without payment, to forbid formal protesting against the Red party, and to place cities under military rule. Because of the wanton requisitioning of supplies, farmers began reducing production or refusing to plant crops entirely. By 1921, the situation had escalated to a famine. In that year alone a staggering five million people died from famine and related diseases.



A 1920 Soviet propaganda poster that reads: “Labor Will Rule the World!” (Source: New York Public Library).

Though Lenin’s use of War Communism helped win the war for the Bolsheviks, it failed miserably in steadying the Russian economy. That would take many decades of hard work and is an effort that continues to this day.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

- 1914** – Germany declares war on Russia (WWI)
- 1915** – Having suffered serious defeats in the war, Russia begins its Great Retreat
- 1916** – Food and fuel shortages, high inflation, and military defeats fuel a series of strikes and protests and general unrest
- 1917** – The February Revolution overthrows the Tsar and establishes the Provisional Government
 - The “April Days” demonstrations lead to the fall of the First Provisional Government
 - Prime Minister Lvov resigns, asking Alexander Kerensky to form a new government (established July 25)
 - A third coalition government forms with the Bolsheviks in powerful positions
 - The October Revolution puts Lenin and the Bolsheviks in power
 - The Russian Civil War begins (December)
- 1918** – Nicholas II and the royal family are executed
 - The Red Terror begins
- 1919** – The Red Army defeats White forces in the Ukraine and Siberia
- 1920** – The remains of the White forces are defeated in Crimea
- 1921** – The Famine of 1921 kills over five million people
- 1922** – The Civil War ends and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) is formally created



Émigrés

The characters of Mikail and Tatiana in *Tovarich* may be fictional, but their plight as impoverished Russian aristocrats was a very familiar one at the time the play was written. Around 1.5 million people fled Russia in the wake of the 1917 revolution, and a high proportion of these émigrés were middle or upper class. As the Bolshevik regime violently stamped out opposition and strove to erase privilege, few in the upper classes could risk remaining in their homeland. They fled in many directions – over 150,000 were evacuated across the Black Sea after the defeat of the White forces, while 250,000 left through Siberia; some were



(Left) A Russian count and former colonel in the Tsarist army, working as a doorman at a Paris restaurant in 1938; (right) a 1928 illustration of a Russian taxi driver in Paris (Source: *Beauty in Exile*).

smuggled out while others used bribes; many were imprisoned or tortured before escaping.

Berlin was the early center of the White Russian diaspora, but by 1924 it had moved to Paris. France held a significant attraction for the Russian aristocracy, having long been a popular vacation spot for the wealthy and a source of tutors for their children. Most already spoke French fluently. Many French people in turn harbored a sort of romanticized fascination with Russians, reflected in Prince Ouratieff's comments in *Tovarich*: "we're congenitally savage...Sentimental barbarians!...our souls are still roaming the steppes, wildly." Even refugees from the most illustrious of backgrounds faced dire poverty in their new situations, however. They had to leave behind, surrender, or sell their valuables to escape and were forced to take up work as taxi drivers, waiters, teachers, and doormen to survive. The noble Russian taxi driver became a trope that appeared not only in *Tovarich* but also in other contemporary literature, journalism, and illustration (see image, left).

1920s New York and Paris were in the full swing of the Jazz Age and the "Roaring Twenties." But life was different for the émigré communities, who dreamed of their homeland and all they had lost. As historian James E. Hassell notes:

[T]he great majority of Russian émigrés inhabited an entirely different Paris and New York. These cities for them were havens to cherish the past rather than the future.



Commentary & Criticism

A MAN OF MANY MOODS: “That Deval is an artist is evident. Whether he is giving us a gay comedy or a serious play he has a light touch, good taste, clever lines and theatrical sense. If an author’s work expresses the author’s attitude toward life, what is the attitude of Deval? He must be a man of many moods. On the one hand, under cover of the modern not-too-serious manner, he shows himself an idealist, a keen psychologist, a clever satirist of the weaknesses of modern society, an author of great talent who has a serious purpose. On the other hand, he knows the road to purely theatrical success, the way to write a play for immediate popularity and revenue, as well as for more lasting fame. Most of us like to season our more serious moments with a little spice of fun and gaiety.”

– Mary E. Sharp, in *The French Review* (1939)

ELEGANT SATIRE: “In essence therefore, we have two quite distinct plays here: one is the old “Admirable Crichton” comedy of manners about servants being vastly superior to their superiors; the other is a rather more serious look at what was for the mid-’30s still an extremely topical issue, the plight of the old Russian

aristocracy when separated from its rubles and Chekhovian estates.

But the brilliance of Deval and his original American translator, the dramatist Robert Sherwood, was to unite these domestic and political themes in a social satire of elegant and tremendous expertise.”

– Sheridan Morley, in *The New York Times* (1991)

AN UNEXPECTED ENDING: “...M. Deval is too clever to let his comedy expire on [the] commonplace scene of unmasking. Among the second-act visitors he includes a ruthless, overbearing emissary of Soviet Russia whom the Grand Duchess and the Prince have good reason to hate...[and who] sends a chill of apprehension down the spine of an affable bit of fooling.”

– Brooks Atkinson, in *The New York Times* (1936)

MODERN POSSIBILITIES: “The world of Russian exiles is now mythology, but the play – very well done and very funny – remains a study of manners that could, particularly in the last act, inspire in a director a modern perspective.”

– In *Le Monde* (1974), translated from the French



Quotable:

SHERWOOD ON *TOVARICH* (EXCERPTS)

Those who have traveled over the scarred face of Europe in recent years have noticed that a certain lack of harmony prevails. The importance and the dignity of the life of each individual is dictated as arbitrarily and maintained as artificially as is the value of the local monetary unit. But, while observing chaotic differences between the European state, you will also notice that the nations have retained resemblance to each other in two respects: in all of them the munitions plants have been doing capacity business and so has a comedy called *Tovarich*.

Tovarich ran for some eight hundred performances in Paris and has since been produced and reproduced in virtually every city and town in Europe. Why this simple play should have been so conspicuous an international success, I do not know. Certainly it possesses what the boys are pleased to call a “well-worn theme.” It departs from the accepted formula only in the final scene which was written on Jacques Deval’s cuff; here we see the phenomenon of noble servants who are supremely happy because they have been granted the privilege of staying in the kitchen. However, the well-worn-theme theory isn’t good enough to account for the enthusiasm which *Tovarich* has evoked from

all races and classes, from Warsaw to Warner Brothers.

Tovarich undoubtedly has something which should engage the attention of serious drama students the world over. In answer to the question, which no one has asked me, “What is this certain something?”—I must reply, “I don’t know.” I can only say that when I first read the play it got me, and I was induced to make my one and only adaptation. I was glad of the chance to render into English that last cuff-scene, wherein two people, whom you can’t help liking, get together with their worst enemy and make peace with him and give him all they possess and call him “Comrade” and then go out to get good and drunk.

It may well be that the universal popularity of *Tovarich* is entirely due to the fact that it tells the meaning of the unpronounceable word which is its title—“Comrade.” Perhaps, inadvertently, M. Deval has proved that biological laws have not been repealed, after all. Perhaps Hitler has a subconscious craving to be pals with *The New Masses*, and vice versa. Perhaps we’re *all* crazy.

ABOUT THIS PASSAGE

This passage is an abridged version of Robert Sherwood’s forward to his 1937 adaptation of *Tovarich*. *Tovarich* was the only adaptation penned by Sherwood, who won several Pulitzer Prizes with his own plays.



In This Production



Above: Costume designs by Paul Canada for the Imperial robes worn by Mikail (left) and Tatiana (right) at the end of the play.

Right: Set models by Brittany Vasta for Acts 1 and 2.



Tovarich

A Production History

Tovarich (or *Tovaritch*) was written by prolific French playwright Jacques Deval and first produced in October 1933 at the Théâtre de Paris, starring Romanian-French actress Elvira Popescu. It was a smash hit, running for some 800 performances in Paris and subsequently produced across Europe. Adolf Hitler is said to have seen it several times – after first 1) ascertaining that Deval had no Semitic ancestry, and 2) having the ending changed to a denunciation of the Soviet Commissar, Gorotchenko.

Famed American playwright Robert E. Sherwood loved *Tovarich* so much that he was inspired to write his only adaptation of a play. Sherwood himself was unsure what the particular draw of the play was, noting in his [foreward to the published edition](#) only that it “got” him. His adaptation premiered at the Lyric Theatre in London in 1935, then opened on Broadway at the Plymouth Theatre on October 15, 1936, where it ran for 356 performances. Tatiana was played by Marta Abba, in her Broadway debut. Abba was a confidante and muse to the great Luigi Pirandello, who passed away during the run of *Tovarich* and whose death was announced to the public from the stage of the Plymouth Theatre by Abba.

Tovarich's popularity in Europe translated to America as well.



Marta Abba and John Halliday, Plymouth Theatre, 1936 (Source: McGraw-Hill).



Natalia Makarova and Robert Powell, Chichester Festival, 1991 (Source: Bentley's Bedlam).

Several high-profile off-Broadway runs followed the Broadway run, including a 1937 Los Angeles production with horror film star Béla Lugosi as Gorotchenko. This opening night was the highest grossing in the history of the Biltmore Theatre at the time and was attended by the likes of Cary Grant, Norma Shearer, Marlene Dietrich, and Claudette Colbert. When the manager moved the Russian band from the orchestra pit to a box in order to free up additional seats, the new seats sold out in 20 minutes.

Tovarich's mass popularity attracted the notice of filmmakers in Hollywood and elsewhere. In 1935, Jacques Deval adapted, produced, and directed a French film version of his play; then



in 1937 Warner Brothers released a film based on the Sherwood script, directed by Anatole Litvak and starring Claudette Colbert (Hollywood's highest-paid star in 1938) and Charles Boyer. It also featured Basil Rathbone (soon to become the iconic Sherlock Holmes) as Commissar Gorotchenko, and was the first film to use the Warners fanfare music by Max Steiner, who also scored the movie. An Italian film came later, in the 1960s.

By 1937, *Tovarich's* popularity had become almost proverbial. Robert Sherwood had playfully written that the only similarity between the European countries after WWI was that "in all of them the munitions plants have been doing capacity business and so has a comedy called *Tovarich*." It was a huge fad across the Western world, produced not only on the West End, Broadway, and at regional theatres, but also in amateur and university productions from the 1930s until the early 1950s. Warner Brothers traded on the play's well-known success by releasing a film trailer that showed "audience members" excited



A poster for the 1937 Claudette Colbert film and a screenshot from the movie trailer (Source: Warner Bros.).

about seeing the film:

HUSBAND: "Honey, this is the first time you've been dressed on time since we were married!"

WIFE: "But of course, darling – tonight's our night to see *Tovarich*!"

Despite its success, *Tovarich* was not revived on Broadway until 1952, when the New York City Theatre Company produced it at City Center. Starring the famous drama teacher husband and wife team of Uta Hagen and Herbert Berghof, it ran for under two weeks. Reviewers still found it charming and funny, but in the era of McCarthyism the last scene no longer seemed plausible and the play was considered dated. In 1963 it was reincarnated as a Broadway musical starring Vivien Leigh, who won a Tony for the role. Critics, however, saw few merits to the show other than the performance of its leading lady, and since then there have been very few productions of any version of the play. The most notable revival since the 1950s was a 1991 Chichester Festival Theatre production starring Russian ballerina Natalia Marakova alongside Robert Powell.

New York Times critic Sheridan Morley, in his review of the 1991 production, puts his finger on the appeal of *Tovarich*: "[it unites] domestic and political themes in a social satire of elegant and tremendous expertise." A well-crafted play that is both hilarious and touchingly sad, that deals with both the mundane idiosyncrasies of everyday life and the deadly serious themes of war, torture, greed, love, and forgiveness, *Tovarich*, once the play heard 'round the world, has now been taken from the shelf, dusted off, and set back under stage lights here at STNJ.



Foreign terms & References

FRENCH

lèse-majesté – ‘injured majesty’; a crime against the dignity of a sovereign

Moselle – wine produced along the Moselle River in eastern France

Quai de Bourbon – a road along the Seine in Paris

touché – ‘touched’; in fencing, the acknowledgment of a hit



The Lubyanka building in Moscow
(Source: Wikimedia Commons).

Cossacks – an East Slavic people

Grand Duchess – title given to daughters and male-line granddaughters of the Tsar

Jitomir (Zhytomyr) – a city in what is now western Ukraine

RUSSIAN

Bolsheviks – the communist faction that came to power during the Russian Revolution

Commissar – a Communist official charged with enforcing party loyalty in the military

Kronstadt – a fortified town and port key to the defense of Petrograd during the civil war

Loubianka (Lubyanka) Prison – famous Moscow prison and secret police headquarters during the Revolution

nitchevo – ‘nothing’; ‘it doesn’t matter’

“Ochi Chorniya” – traditional Russian song, ‘Black Eyes’ or ‘Dark Eyes’

Orlovskai (Orlovskaya) – a region in western Russia, near modern-day Belarus and Ukraine

Petropolsk – in modern-day Kazakhstan

sakouska (zakuska) – hors d’oeuvres

Tcheka (Cheka) – Soviet state security organization

tovarich – comrade; friend

Tsarkoe (Tsarskoye) Selo – the location of a former residence of the Russian imperial family

Uhlands – Polish light cavalry

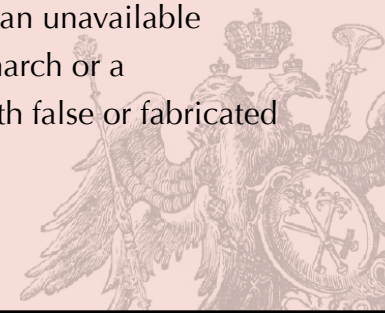
OTHER

Aldo Nadi – famous Italian fencing champion

pretender (to the throne) – one who claims an unavailable position of power; usually a former monarch or a descendant. Also may apply to those with false or fabricated claims to power

How Do You Say It?

If you are confused about how to pronounce ‘tovarich,’ you are not alone! As the title of this play, it’s a Russian word in an American translation of a French play. As a rough guide, try saying it ‘tuh-VAH-rish.’



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