

MEDIA RELEASE

Soulpepper presents *A Month in the Country*

Toronto, ON – June 9, 2010 – **Albert Schultz**, Founding Artistic Director of Soulpepper Theatre Company, today announced that the company's production of *A Month in the Country* will run July 6 - August 7, 2010, at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts.

Hungarian master director **László Marton** returns to Soulpepper to direct one of the masterpieces of Russian literature which is newly adapted by Soulpepper Founding Member **Susan Coyne** (*Kingfisher Days, Slings and Arrows*) and **Mr. Marton**, who co-adapted Soulpepper's award-winning *Platonov* in 1999. *A Month in the Country* is a richly textured, love-filled comedy where the magic of a summer holiday turns several hearts upside-down. Now considered a masterpiece, Turgenev's play was first produced in 1872 by the Maly Theatre and again in 1879 but it wasn't until 30 years later with the Moscow Art Theatre's production, directed by Constantin Stanivslasky, that the play was embraced by Russian audiences.

László Marton directs a stellar cast including Founding Members **Diego Matamoros**, **Nancy Palk**, **William Webster** and **Joseph Ziegler**, Soulpepper regulars **Fiona Byrne** (*Waiting for the Parade*), **Hazel Desbarats**, **Jeff Lillico**, **Michael Simpson** and **David Storch** as well as **Diana Bentley**, **Tal Gottfried**, and **Charles Vandervaart** in their Soulpepper debuts. Joining the creative team and making his Soulpepper debut is Romanian set designer **Andrei Both** who has a 25- year international career and resides as the Head of Design in the prestigious University of California San Diego design program.

A Month in the Country previews July 6, 2010, opens July 12, and runs until August 7, 2010 at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts, located at 55 Mill Street, Building 49, in the Distillery Historic District. Tickets range from \$31.20 - \$75.33 (including 13% HST) and are available by calling the Young Centre box office at 416.866.8666 or by visiting soulpepper.ca. \$22 tickets are available for 21-30 year-olds at stageplay.ca. StagePlay is sponsored by TD Bank Financial Group.

A Month in the Country is generously supported by Robin and David Young. 2010 Soulpepper Lead Sponsors are: Sun Life Financial, Scotiabank Group and TELUS. Soulpepper gratefully acknowledges annual operating support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council.

Soulpepper Theatre Company is an artist-founded, classical repertory theatre company with a three-tiered mandate: to present the world's greatest stories in vital Canadian interpretations; to train a new generation of theatre artists; and to inspire and enrich youth through mentorship and access program

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Soulpepper's Production images for A Month in the Country are available to download @:

http://www.soulpepper.ca/media/media_gallery.aspx

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BACKGROUND NOTES

The road to becoming a classic play, it seems, is not always direct, and *A Month in the Country* took the long route. Written over a period of two years (1848-1850) mostly in France while Turgenev was pining after his life-long love, opera superstar Pauline Viardot, it took more than fifty years for this play to be fully accepted even in Turgenev's native Russia.

In 1850 the Russian censor refused to allow the play – then titled *The Student* – to be produced, strongly disapproving of its overt social criticism. Turgenev, never completely confident of his theatrical abilities, made some adjustments to the text, including changing the title to *Two Women*, and then submitted the play for publication in 1854. Permission was granted, provided certain changes, more moral than political, were made. Turgenev did another re-write and finally found a title that stuck: *A Month in the Country*. It came out in Russia in 1855 but the play's lack of a clear moral stance was controversial enough to ensure that no theatre company stepped forward to produce it. Its author was so disheartened he gave up writing for the theatre altogether to focus on novels and prose works.

A Month in the Country was in fact not produced until 1872 by the Maly Theatre, and then only in a single "benefit" performance, chiefly because one of their actresses longed to play the lead character, Natalya Petrovna. The reception was tepid and the play was not produced again until 1879, when it was more cordially received. Most sources agree that the play did not enter the Russian canon until thirty years later, twenty-plus years after Turgenev's death, by way of a visionary production at the renowned Moscow Art Theatre. That incandescent interpretation appeared in 1909, directed by the great actor/manager Constantin Stanislavsky, who also played the role of the hopelessly enamored, frustrated lover Rakitin.

Richard Freeborn, who translated the play into English some years ago, has said, "This play has been called Chekhovian though it predates Chekhov's great works for the theatre by more than forty years. Its success was due to Chekhov's popularity and also to the Moscow Art Theatre's production." Perhaps Stanislavsky's troupe was able to reveal the heart of the play because of their understanding of Chekhov, or possibly because they had developed a strong, ensemble style of acting. The early productions of the play tended to serve as a vehicle for the actress playing the role of Natalya Petrovna, when what Turgenev actually wrote was an ensemble piece that derives its power and warmth from the interplay between all of the characters' hopes and longings, dreams and frustrations.

BACKGROUND NOTES CONTINUED ...

What is timeless – and so modern – is Turgenev's refusal to judge his characters. It's easy to see why people in 1850 might have been baffled by this story. In those days, it was generally believed to be impossible for a married woman to have feelings for anyone other than her husband without being a bad person. Natalya Petrovna is many things but she is not malicious or mean, and Turgenev neither condemns nor approves of her behaviour. He simply reveals her to us in all her human frailty: a woman who is, ultimately, a failure at love. The writer himself had a love affair that defied convention and, some might say, good sense too, so he knew from his own experience that the heart does not observe societal codes, nor obey the dictates of reason. There is no grand or tidy lesson to be learned – necessarily – from the goings-on during this month in the country. There is only the sudden, shocking, fierce experience of love: original, sometimes brutal and always unforgettable.

Tidbits

- In 1965, Ingrid Bergman starred in a London production of *A Month in the Country*, directed by Michael Redgrave.
- The Royal Ballet's Frederick Ashton freely adapted the novel into a one-act ballet in 1976, set to the music of Chopin. Natalya was danced by Canadian Lynn Seymour. The National Ballet of Canada is the only other company given permission to perform Ashton's ballet. Karen Kain danced Natalya in 1995.
- At the Roundabout in New York in 1979, mother and daughter Tammy Grimes and Amanda Plummer starred as Natalya Petrovna and Vera Alexandrovna.
- A film version was released in 1983, starring Susannah York and Ian McShane (later of HBO's *Deadwood*).
- In the 1990's a translation by Brian Friel (writer of this season's *Faith Healer*) enjoyed multiple productions at the Abbey in Dublin, the RSC and at the Pit in London.
- A 1995 New York production of the play starred Helen Mirren (herself of Russian extraction), who won a Theatre World Award for her work as Natalya Petrovna, and Ron Rifkin (now starring in the television series *Brothers and Sisters* with Sally Field), as Rakitin.

Notes by

Soulpepper Associate Artist Paula Wing

ARTIST PROFILE

Susan Coyne is an accomplished Award-winning writer and actress, and a founding member of Soulpepper. She previously adapted Chekhov's Platonov for this company, as well as appearing in many productions over the years.

Soulpepper: How long have you been working on this translation?

Susan Coyne: Just since September – that's when Soulpepper approached me. And I didn't have the draft I was supposed to translate until January.

SP: That's a short time to do your work.

SC: Yes, and no. I have somebody who's telling me what it is that I'm doing, and that's László (Marton, the director). My job is really to figure out a play for László to direct in English. He has the lore and the history, the vision and the sensibility for the play. I'm just figuring out English words for the relationships, scenarios and situations in the story.

SP: So it's a translation that isn't?

SC: In a way. The draft László sent me is a literal English translation, which is taken from a Hungarian translation from the original Russian. So it's a little like putting on rubber gloves, sticking your hands into a bag, feeling around, and then drawing a picture of it. (Laughter) And right now I'm so far into it I really have almost have nothing to say. (Laughter)

SP: So how are you approaching this complex task?

SC: Well honestly when I read the first unwieldy translations – I read a few English language versions of the play in the fall – I thought, "I don't get this play." But László has really helped me to see and understand it. He says it's like Platonov (by Chekhov, which Ms. Coyne adapted, along with Mr. Marton, for our 1999 season). It's the work of a young genius. Turgenev has amazing instincts but he doesn't really understand the form of a play, in a sense. He's a novelist writing a play. So László worked on the text in Hungarian, and he's pared away a good deal of it to uncover something simpler and more direct. My impression, having got to the core of it, is that it's very sweet, unusual and quite delicate. Very modern or maybe I mean timeless. So I'm enjoying it. And the situations are – I understand the comedy of it now too. I think. (Laughter)

ARTIST PROFILE CONTINUED...

SP: I know you and László are working on Skype, with him in Budapest and you in Toronto. What do you sort through together?

SC: Looking at the literal translation, sometimes I literally don't understand the line. The choice of words is too ambiguous so sometimes I have to ask him to clarify a particular line. And that can lead to a discussion of the situation, and it often turns out that I've misunderstood something. There's a lot of subtext in the play, moments where characters are taken aback and don't know what to say in the moment so what they come up with is inadequate, or awkward. In my work with László as an actress playing Chekhov, he's taught me as an actor that you have to always, as he says, be brave enough to confess the face while losing it. What he means is the face you have just before you pull yourself together and recover from a blow. The face you wear at the moment of shock, when you are completely vulnerable. Turgenev's characters are like Chekhov's: they are amazed to discover the depth of their own vulnerability. Most of them are completely without guile, caught unawares by their feelings – incredibly intense summer storm kind of feelings that come out of nowhere.

SP: Have you found many similarities between Turgenev and Chekhov?

SC: Yes, it's amazing, really, but Turgenev was first. I like the play because it doesn't moralize about the characters' feelings or try to explain them away. Natalya is a young woman who's completely blindsided by this passion and Turgenev doesn't try to justify it, or psychologize it away. Like Chekhov, he's a very non-judgemental writer, very compassionate to all his characters. The only character he does judge is the cynic, Schpigelsky.

SP: They say you can't be wise and in love.

SC: Turgenev's very funny on the subject of people falling in love – he calls it “this famous feeling.” And for Natalya, the discovery is: it's awful! This famous feeling makes you so vulnerable, it exposes you so ruthlessly. Rakitin, for example, is hopelessly in love with Natalya, and it causes him so much pain. He says to Belyaev: “I guess you think it's the greatest thing in the world to be in love.” But Turgenev resists coming to an easy conclusion and that's why the text is so multi-layered: sometimes the characters can only hint at what they feel. There's a mystery to these things.