

YEVGENIY SHVARTS

THREE PLAYS



with an introduction
and notes by

AVRIL PYMAN

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Introduction

Yevgeniy Shvarts

THE Soviet Union tends to remember Yevgeniy L'vovich Shvarts as a kind of universal uncle. He was, in his latter years at least, stout, wise and witty—and a wonderful story-teller. He was a success at children's functions and everybody's favourite after-dinner speaker. His poker-faced humour was subtle enough for the most sophisticated or broad enough for the most juvenile, according to mood. He could reduce serious men of literature to tears of laughter by his rendering of a "Dog's Trial" in which Counsels for the Prosecution and the Defence, Accused and Judge, spoke only in growls and barks. Gregarious in the extreme, it was often said that he was an even better raconteur than a writer, and there is a story that his producer was once actually reduced to locking him into a hotel bedroom to make him finish a script: he enjoyed "telling" the actors what was going to happen next in a series of breathtaking improvisations, but writing, for him, was sweated labour, a constant striving for perfection. He would never re-work a manuscript which he, as an artist, considered satisfactorily completed, preferring to put it away quietly at the back of a

drawer and start the next. In spite of this unostentatious intractability, he was beloved by all: by children and grown-ups, by rival writers, by actors at rehearsals (where the author is usually the most unpopular figure present), by producers, by good party members such as Vera Ketlinskaya, courageous secretary to the Writers' Union during the Leningrad blockade, and even by bad literary officials who never quite perceived in this fat and jovial fellow that which so disquieted Caesar in the lean, hungry and unsmiling Cassius: "a great observer" who looked "quite through the deeds of men".

Shvarts's drama is associated with the excellent Leningrad Children's Theatre, Teatr Yunogo Zritelya, for which he wrote many plays, and with the late Nikolay Akimov's Comedy Theatre: that is to say with gay grotesque, sparkling fantasy and deliberate theatricality. He is remembered also for his connection with the brilliant children's magazines of the twenties, *Novyy Robinson*, *Chizh* and *Yozh*. At this time, under the austere guidance of Samuil Marshak, children's literature was treated with a respect hitherto accorded only to grown-up forms. Grown-ups, however, who ventured into the Editorial Office occupied by Shvarts, the provincial Jewish intelligent, Oleynikov, his antipode by origin and in physical appearance, the snub-nosed, curly-headed, Red Cossack son of a village inn-keeper, Irakliy Andronnikov, later to become famous as story-teller, impersonator and writer of exciting pieces of literary detective work, and the pretty young secretary Henrietta Davydovna Levitana, found themselves in an upside-down world of childish practical jokes and non-stop, riotous play-acting. Я люблю Генриэтту Давыдовну, wrote Oleynikov mournfully:

А она меня, кажется, нет.
Ею Шварцу квитанция выдана,
Ну, а мне и квитанции нет.

One visitor recalls how, on his first visit to this office, he was

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met by Shvarts and Oleynikov hurtling along the passage on all fours pretending to be camels.

The work of Shvarts's maturity is monolithic. His fairy tales and plays for children can be read by grown-ups: the sophisticated politico-philosophical satires for which he has become famous beyond the borders of his own country are written in the form of fairy tales, and some of their best moments are of utterly unforced "childish" humour. In *The Dragon*, for instance, sociologically and politically Shvarts's most heavily "loaded" play, there is a slightly off-beat dialogue between a donkey and a cat.

CAT. Why aren't you laughing?

DONKEY. Someone'd clock me one. Whenever I laugh out loud, people say: that damn donkey shrieking again. And hit me.

CAT. I see! You mean, you have such a piercing laugh?

DONKEY. Uhu!

CAT. And what makes you laugh?

DONKEY. All depends. . . . I think and I think, then suddenly I remember something funny. Horses make me laugh.

CAT. Why?

DONKEY. They just do . . . idiots.

This sort of thing comes from a remarkable and spontaneous gift of empathy for the world of animals, children and magic. The author is at home in the conventions of his own world and never wearies us with allegory. His works do not illustrate a thesis; they tell a story. Make what you can of it. His plays are, in a sense, "moralities", but the moral emerges from the stability of the writer's own moral universe rather than from didactic intent. This universe is dominated by a full-blooded struggle between good and evil in the shape of "professional" heroes straight out of legend and folktale, such as Lancelot ("alias George, alias Perseus the Vagabond") who slays the Dragon, or the magnificent Vasilisa, widow and mother of heroes, who frees two of her young sons turned into maple-trees by a witch ("Never mind, what do you expect? These

things will happen on the road!")—and "professional" villains such as the Dragon himself, who only refrains from reducing his subjects to total despair because somebody has to feed him, or Baba Yaga the witch, a choice little character who drools dotingly over her own iniquity.

Yet "Uncle Zhenya" was more serious, more subtle, more tragic than his theatre, at least as it was realised during his lifetime. Where his plays make their impact is in the "human all-too-human" sphere between Good and Evil: "Riches and poverty, privilege and slavery, reason and stupidity, sanctity, crime, conscience, shamelessness—all mixed up so inextricably it's really horrifying. It will be very difficult to disentangle you, to straighten you out and put you in order and yet not to harm any live thing. In fairy-stories everything is much simpler!"

Dark indeed are the forces of evil in the world of Yevgeniy L'vovich Shvarts, and terribly deeply entrenched in the human soul are cowardice, indifference, sloth, greed, hypocrisy and distrust. "Human souls, my good man, can stand a lot of wear and tear. You hack their bodies in half—they die. You tear their souls to pieces—they become more malleable, no more.... Leaky souls, venal souls, seared souls, dead souls...."

Shvarts was an optimist, but an optimist who had touched bottom and kicked off and up again, from the depths. In his life he was richly acquainted with hardship, nervous strain and sorrow. Born in Kazan, 1896, the son of a provincial doctor, he had an unsettled childhood involving a nightmare journey through the heat and dust of Southern Russia and the harrowing experience of witnessing a prison interview between his hot-tempered father (who served a term of imprisonment for participation in a Student Social-Democrat study circle, after which he was forbidden domicile in the capitals) and his much-loved mother end in a fight between his father and the policeman on duty who, suspecting a message passed from lip to lip in the couple's farewell kiss, had made a brutal attempt to force

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open his mother's mouth. This scene was evidently so distressing that it was subsequently expunged from the three-year-old Zhenya's conscious memory, but at the time he cried and shivered uncontrollably all that day. From his youth he suffered from a nervous tremor of the hands which made writing a burden to him and precluded his speaking from notes. His student days in Rostov-on-Don coincided with the chaos, hunger, and perpetual insecurity of war, Revolution and Civil War.

As an author, Shvarts was late in "finding himself". Having studied law, he turned to acting in a semi-amateur but very avant-garde company consisting largely of friends and relations, then worked in the provincial Donbass miners' newspaper *Kochegarka* and the periodical *Zaboy*, then on the editorial board of children's magazines in Leningrad, writing "features" and editing other people's work. Yet, while still an actor, when he followed his company from Rostov to the hungry, desolate Leningrad of 1921, the author in him was sufficiently alive to make him *persona grata* amongst the "Serapion Brothers". If Shvarts wrote at all at that time, he showed nothing to his new writing friends, yet they considered "that he would inevitably become an author. If not today—then tomorrow, if not tomorrow—then the day after."* Olga Forsch, in her reminiscences of the Writers' Community Dwelling which she aptly named "The Crazy Ark" ("Sumashedshiy Korabl'", 1931) gives a vivid picture of "Genya Chorn", one of the most amusing and observant habitués of this weird intellectuals' refuge, whom she remembers principally for his remarkable ability to organise both the writers and their normally undisciplined children in improvised skits and amateur theatricals. *Kochegarka* and *Zaboy* were more than provincial newspapers. What happened here was a spontaneous explosion of new talent in a new field: a provincial newspaper and journal for the working man in the first Workers' State,

* Mikhail Slonimsky, *My Znali Yevgeniya Shvartsa*, Leningrad, Moscow, 1966, p. 7.

run by youthful enthusiasts who had, perhaps, little idea of what they were trying to do, but were at least determined that it should be done surpassingly well. In the offices of *Yozh* and *Chizh* Shvarts, while still writing very little himself, was associated with another literary group, the self-styled "Oberiuty",* comprising the poets Nikolay Zabolotsky, Daniil Ivanovich Yubachev (Kharms), Aleksandr Vvedensky, Leonid Savel'ev, Yu. Vladimirov, D. Levin, K. Vaginov, I. Bakhteryov and Shvarts's Cossack friend of *Kochegarka* days, Oleynikov. To some extent, the *Oberiu* group took their inspiration from the early Futurists, particularly Khlebnikov, whose experiments with word and sound they applied most successfully to children's verse. It is symptomatic of their self-consciously twentieth-century attitude that the group included a cinema section. The *Oberiuty*, with the odd individual exception (notably, of course, Zabolotsky) did not establish themselves as grown-up poets, and it is, perhaps deservedly, largely their brilliant children's verses that have survived them. However, they were not all writers for children, and those who were did not limit themselves to this genre. Sparked off by Shvarts's eccentric, off-beat and inconsequential jingles—which for him were a purely extra-literary amusement—these associates of his soon became real adepts of the genre, counting among their prosodic antecedents two distinguished, albeit non-existent, luminaries of Russian comic verse: Koz'ma Prutkov and Dostoyevsky's remarkable Captain Lebyadkin, and a whole tradition of poetry-between-friends, not intended for publication, originating from the eighteenth-century Count Khvostov. Finally they raised the technique to a serious surrealism which became less humorous and more satiric—sometimes even desperate and tragic—as talent and eccentricity became

* Oberiu—Ob'edineniye real'nogo iskusstva. There is an interesting account of Shvarts's connection with the group in I. Rakhtangov's *Rasskazy po pamyati*, Moscow, 1966, pp. 137–182. See also R. R. Milner-Gulland, *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, 1970.