

BUCHENWALD

By
Cristina A. Bejan

BUCHENWALD

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BUCHENWALD

*This play is dedicated to Ingrid Zeller, Professor of German,
Northwestern University.*

BUCHENWALD

BUCHENWALD was first produced at the Struble Theatre, Northwestern University, as a joint project in the German and Theatre Departments, in Evanston, IL, May 2004, and directed by Cristina A. Bejan.

Richter.....Ron Butts
Novsky.....Alan Gaskill
A.....(unable to recover)



CAST: 3 Men

| | |
|---------|--|
| RICHTER | 40s/50s, Nazi SS Commandant of Buchenwald |
| NOVSKY | 18-20s, Soviet soldier |
| A | 30s/40s/50s, higher officer in the Soviet army |

TIME: 1946, just after WWII ends.

PLACE: Buchenwald concentration camp, outside of Weimar, Germany.

BUCHENWALD

Lights up. RICHTER is in his cell, sitting with his legs over the side of the hard wood bed, his head in his hands. A small bowl is sitting under the bed. There is a single weak, yellowish, bare light bulb hanging on a string from above: the sole source of light in this window-less cell. Richter is wearing a worn-out Soviet prisoner uniform. He is dirty and disheveled.

Two voices are heard from a distance from off stage right, speaking in Russian.

A. Kamera Nomer Desat': Komnata Uyedineniya. V kontze koridora, s leva! (*Cell Number 10: Special Confinement Unit. At the end of the hall on the left!*)

NOVSKY. Yest' Kommandir! (*Yessir!*)

(A Soviet soldier, NOVSKY, enters from stage right, with a rifle rested on his shoulders. He walks up to Richter's cell and turns, facing the audience. His back is to the cell "door" and he stands guard. There is no actual door: it is invisible and imagined. Richter is alerted to the new arrival by the sound of Novsky's boots. He jerks his head up, as if out of a trance.)

RICHTER. (*Yells to the door.*) Hast du mein Frühstück endlich gebracht? (*Have you finally brought my breakfast?*)

NOVSKY. No, not yet.

RICHTER. Oh . . . (*Thinks to himself.*) you speak German?

(Novsky is staunchly silent, having realized his error, he does not respond. Richter smiles, he lies back on the bed with his knees bent and his head on his hands and starts to whistle the Hitler Youth theme. He whistles and

BUCHENWALD

looks at the door expectantly, hoping to provoke Novsky. Eventually he stops. Pauses and waits for a response. None comes.)

RICHTER. You like that? *(Waits, no response.)* Who the hell are you? Are you deaf? *(No response, sits up, eventually stands up and walks to the door.)* You speak German, commie? Why are you standing outside my door, you fuck?! What's going on? Is today my day? Why can't you people fucking communicate? What the hell is wrong with you?! Fuck you Russians! Fuck you Russians! *(Pauses.)* You understand that, you fuck?

NOVSKY. Shut up, asshole!

RICHTER. *(In disbelief and delight.)* He speaks German! How about that?! A Soviet speaks German!

A. *(Roars from offstage.)* Serzhant Novsky?!!! *(Sergeant Novsky?!!!)*

NOVSKY. Yest' Kommandir?! *(Yessir?!)*

A. Ne razgovariat's zakluchonim! Ponatno?! *(No talking with the prisoner! Understand?!)*

NOVSKY. Yest' Kommandir!

RICHTER. Novsky, eh? Your name is Novsky. *(Chuckles to himself.)* How about that?! Novsky speaks German!

(Novsky stands motionless and expressionless before the cell and does not respond.)

Novsky, do you know where you are? You know what this is? *(Richter motions to the cell around him.)* This is the chalk chamber. Prisoners were put in here and the entire room was covered in chalk dust, including the prisoner himself. Completely white: like a field blanketed by snow. The prisoners weren't allowed to move and hours, sometimes days later the cell would be opened. If a mark were made in the chalk, they'd be shot.

(Laughs to himself.) No chalk for me, thank God, right? I can move wherever I want to- *(During this next part, Richter steps up on his bed, touches the walls, sits and rolls around on the floor, eventually just laying there on his back: his legs and arms fully spread out.)* - I could run laps in here and you guys would have no evidence. I could do gymnastics and it wouldn't matter. I can pass the time by jacking off and you wouldn't be

BUCHENWALD

able to tell. I'm still alive, right? (*Laughing to himself.*) Of all cells, I'm in this one and I can move! Germans would find that funny . . . Apparently, you don't.

(Richter stands up and begins to direct his comments to Novsky, who does his best not to react or respond. Richter's words are harsh, disgusted and disapproving.)

Do you Russians have a sense of humor? Oh, sorry, I mean you Soviets? Novsky, are you even Russian? Or are you one of the many people that you conquered and submitted to your communist ways? Ukrainian? Latvian? Georgian? Or, now, maybe you're Polish, Romanian or even German-how many countries have you invaded? What's this about freedom from the Nazis? I don't know everything, but I heard about Yalta and I heard about the tanks. I know truths that you won't even admit to. You and your ideals. No, but Novsky sounds like a Russian name to me. You sound young too, I guess they'd only station a young soldier to guard the cell of a broken, worn-out officer. I bet you're a young Russian, a young Bolshevik full of ideals. Unattainable, unrealistic ideals, mind you. But at least they are ideals, right? Fundamentally, even though you are standing outside my cell ready to kill me, you're a good person, right? Because you won, right? Because you have morality. Nietzsche would argue that morality only enslaves man, but you have it: the correct morality and you won. But Nietzsche also believed in a sort of survival of the fittest, of battle, of the most powerful overcoming the weak. You won, so you are the powerful one. I am weak. You have control. I don't. You are the good person. And I am the bad. That would be Nietzsche's explanation for what happened, but you are not allowed to believe that. You have ideals and morals, and you sacrifice other people for them-

(By this point, Novsky is visibly affected by Richter. He is sweating and uncomfortable. Richter is relentless.)

But that's bullshit, there is no such thing. Ideals? Equality? Fairness? Are you kidding me? The person who just shits, eats and sleeps will never be

BUCHENWALD

equal to Napoleon and will never be equal to the shepherd in the field herding his flock of sheep and will never be equal to the person slaving away in the factory, no matter what Marx says and no matter what vast socialist machine tries to make them equal. It won't and can't happen. Exterminate all you want. Turn Nazi camps into Soviet ones, imprison the people you need to submit. Good job. A Jewish banker will never equal the German maintenance man scrubbing dog shit off the sidewalk. Deal with it.

Novsky, I wish you could have seen this place before it was over. (*Nostalgic, longing and wistful.*) I wish you could have seen Buchenwald. I wish you could have seen my Germany. I wish you could have seen me in my pressed uniform, with my medals on my breast. My short cropped hair and the smell of my favorite cologne. I wish you could have been to the military balls, to the galas, to the festivals. Parades in the street. Music. Beer. Rotkäppchen wine. Smiling. Can you believe it? Who would have known? We were so happy. We were proud- proud of who we were. What the hell is wrong with that? I am still proud, but does the world give a shit? Who's allowed to be proud now? Just the Americans and you assholes. And you? You are Russian and proud of it, a real winner you, and you're just waiting for me to die. You're just waiting. Or maybe you'll take me out one day, lead me to the woods, tell me to turn my back and then . . . I know how you guys do it. I don't understand it. There seems to be no method. No reason. Just random. You Russians are so irrational and crazy that I don't even have the sense to be scared for my life. I don't know of a concrete reason you have to kill me, besides for my being the enemy in a war you won what seems like a long time ago. But you haven't killed me yet, so, what does that mean? That's just it, it doesn't mean anything. When you feel like you have to prove a point, when you have to reestablish your cause, when you have to justify an injustice, then you'll kill me. But, of course, I have absolutely no way of knowing or predicting that beforehand . . .

At least we were somewhat predictable, at least we were organized and had a set system. At least we announced loud and clear who was not

BUCHENWALD

wanted. We weren't sneaky about it, like you guys, where anyone and everyone is a suspect of something or other. Jewish, Gypsy, Commie, Black, Homosexual, NON-ARYAN/NON-GERMAN. Very specific, you see? But you Russians, or Soviets, sorry, you have no system. You are just fucked-up insecure idealistic bastards who hunger for blood like any other man. At least we had a game plan, right? But a game plan born out of the same insanity that is the sickness of man that resides in both our peoples. And in every person on this planet. In that sense, we are no different. It's not about ideals. But men and Power. But in the end, no greater Russia; no greater Germany. Just this bullshit.

Sometimes I go back in my mind. To the way things were. And I pretend that it was all up to me and that things happened the way I had hoped they would. Yeah, Novsky! If I controlled the fate of the world, I would not fucking be in this cell guarded by your poor excuse for a man, and you faceless Russian bastards would be cowering in prisons in Moscow and Stalingrad at the points of *our* guns. Our Konzentrationslager filled to the brim with Soviet prisoners of war. The successful Nazi occupation of the Soviet Union. The Nazi empire. Hitler, the next Napoleon, and Richter in his cabinet. Yeah, my name is Richter. But you might have already known that. Do you learn the names of the prisoners? Probably not, but you speak German so maybe you could read the list if you ever saw it. If there is a list. Well, I'm telling you, I'm Richter. Max Richter, SS and the final commandant of here, yes, Buchenwald. And if we had fucking won, you would know that name better than you could recite the pages of the Communist Manifesto. *(He chuckles to himself.)* What a funny thought, a flip of a coin and our situations would be reversed. *(Thinking to himself.)*

Actually, I was stationed in Stalingrad briefly, which gave me the chance to see your grand nation. *(Dripping with sarcasm.)* I remember the train-ride there, which took well over a month. Frighteningly inefficient your transportation system, by the way, the rest of the world has moved on from horse and carriage, but your people? Not yet. Well, moving on, looking through the window I saw Russia. The grand, great, mighty Russia, the heart of the Soviet Union. And what did I see? What did I actually see? I

BUCHENWALD

saw groups of young Russian children chasing the train asking for mercy and money. Scrawny, sick, malnourished kids in rags with sad sad eyes. Eyes that were so much older than their years. I saw a gray empty expanse, endless and the same. Boring. Occasionally we would pass through a factory town of some sort, and we would pass by colorless buildings that had no windows but huge black chimneys pumping thick smoke into the cloudy overcast sky. Dirty. Dead. What for, may I ask?

(Novsky gets a look of remembrance in his eyes and there is a fondness in his face even for what Richter just described: a look of a young man remembering and missing his home.)

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