arts

His stick of dynamite
Will crack my safe so tight.
—Vincent

Stalin's 'Forgotten Holocaust' documented by expatriate

By ADRIAN IWACHIW

Among the atrocities that fill our century's litany of horrors, the Ukraine famine of 1932-33 is undoubtedly the least publicized. *Harvest of Despair* is the first documentary to deal with this deliberate and artificially-created tragedy. The screening will be proceeded by a talk on "Food as a Political Weapon," by York Political Science professor Marko Bojcun.

The "forgotten holocaust"—whose death toll is estimated to have been between six and 10 million, or roughly one-quarter of the Ukrainian population—was the product of Josef Stalin's "five-year plan" to collectivize Soviet-dominated countries. The largely peasant Ukrainian population was particularly resistant to Stalin's drive. To break their spirit and to crush their efforts at cultural and political autonomy, Stalin resorted to the systematic starvation of a nation: wholesale removal of produce and livestock from the Ukraine, deportations, executions, and a closed border.

Harvest of Despair was produced and directed by Canadian expatriate filmmaker Slavko Novitsky (who now lives in the US) and was made through the efforts of the Ukrainian Famine Research Committee, with assistance from the National Film Board of Canada. The 55-minute film compiles rare archival footage—including the all-too-familiar images of bloated children with pleading eyes, piles of corpses and mass graves—together with the testimony of survivors, journalists and foreign diplomats.

The film attempts to deal with the questions: How does one man secretly and systematically condemn an entire nation to starvation? How does the rest of the world pretend it never happened? Why is the famine so unknown even to this day?

The answers *Harvest of Despair* provides are disturbing. Western governments, it asserts, knew of the famine, but, faced with the Great Depression, subjugated their moral obligation behind foreign trade and diplomatic interests. Certainly, though the film does not allow a case to be made for the "other side," there is more than enough evidence to substantiate these claims.

Technically, *Harvest of Despair* has weaknesses that weren't helped by the film's miniscule budget. This is usually the case with such films: the editing seems at times amateurish, and the impact of the film rests on its collection of facts and testimonies, rather than on the colorful technical embellishments of bigger-budget productions.

The Soviet Union continues to deny that the famine even took place. Soviet history textboks, at best, merely refer to the early 1930s as a "difficult time." When millions were dying, food was being shipped out of the Ukraine and sold on foreign markets, to further the pretence that "there is no famine." However, the film, according to co-producer Yurij Luhovy, "was not made out of anger; it was made to show the senselessness of the action. We must always remember this and ensure such incidents never happen again."

If *Harvest of Despair* is a belated cry of outrage against an unconscionable historical horror, it is also a testimony to the human propensity to overlook justice—depending on how the injustice relates to one's immediate needs and one's political views. Western governments, the film charges, failed to address this indescribable horror. Today, one might argue, even the peace movement forfeits its effectiveness and credibility when it fails to address the Soviet fault in continuing to deny their own guilt in such matters.

A victim of Josef Stalin's deliberate famine in the Ukraine in the early 1930s, from the film *Harvest of Despair*, being screened tonight at 7:30 p.m. in Curtis L.

"I" is pulled by himself in scene from Necessary Angel's *Mein*. Squatting is Bruce Vavrina, and standing (l to r) are Maggie Huculak, Denis Forest, and Elizabeth Hanna.

Mein is not to reason why, *Mein* is but to do, and, uh . . .

Mein
by Necessary Angel Theatre Company
Toronto Free Theatre
until March 17

By JASON SHERMAN

Richard Rose, the Artistic Director of Necessary Angel Theatre Company and director of this collective work by the company, outlined his recipe for Successful Drama (with Dora sauce) in a recent article written for the Free Theatre:

1. "Start from nothing."
2. "Start (again) with myself, sifting and examining what would interest me."
3. Add "a new and risky idea," in this case the theme of ambition which, hmm, yes, seems to fit that bill. Let stand while . . .
4. you "invent a whole new way of creating a play."
5. Blend in Macbeth, Richard II, books on the corporate world, a dash of Jan Kott, and Carl Jung to taste.
6. Concoct a "series of images, emotional states, dreams, actions and situations."
7. Improvise and let it "set in the mind of one person."

Present, collect a Dora Award, and there you have it: Successful Drama: *Mein*.

But seriously now.

Rose and his Angels seem to have gone through a lot of trouble to produce what amounts to a series of banal images, actions and situations in this story of one man's unscrupulous rise to and fall from the top of the corporate ladder. Of course, part of the point is to present banality as an everyday fact of living, but the clichés have been internalized to such a degree that insipidity afflicts not only the idea of this drama, but the drama itself. The controlling metaphor—the ladder seen in a dream or vision—is presented in so tedious a series of monologues that the point it makes is lost. And when the metaphor is visualized, with people literally climbing walls, the effect is merely ludicrous.

Then there is the question of the "I" of the play, the ambitious businessman who sells principles, friends and self in order to rise through the ranks. For one thing, it's never made clear just what "I"'s motivation is, whether it is greed, lust, envy, or a self-destructive instinct. The absence of motivation would be fine, except that the omission is not a conscious one; that is, little or no account of it seems to have been taken. We *are* given Macbeth's reasons for murdering Duncan: greed, ambition, pride, and Lady Macbeth, but we don't quite know why "I" drives the Duncan of *Mein* to commit suicide. What we are served instead is another banal metaphor, that of "the game," a cliché so overworked that further comment is redundant.

"I" is played by the five-member cast, in the manner of a psycho-mania play, so that we see and hear the inner workings of the mind while "I" is engaged in various activities. Usually this is very successful, particularly in a scene in which "I" meets Duncan in a restaurant. As "I" makes his deals, the four others respond in kind to the set of social masks and pleasantries "I" goes through.

There is, however, a slight problem with such an approach. The basic character trait of "I" is ambition (supposedly). With a character so completely dominated by one external trait from the outset, the other emotional states represented, such as fear and anxiety, remain, if you will in the "I"'s mind, while greed rises to the surface. The balance is imperfect from the outset, and any resolution becomes not that of the strong or right dominating over the weak or wrong, but of the conscious mind being toppled by unconscious forces.

Mein plays at the Theatre Upstairs. The Free Theatre's production of *The Changeling* continues, but must close soon to make way for *Goodnight Disgrace*, a play about Malcolm Lowry.

Pure Goldby in Tarragon's Chekhov masterwork appreciation

Uncle Vanya
by Anton Chekhov
Tarragon Theatre
until the end of March

By KEVIN CONNOLLY

Historically, Chekhov has been one of the most misunderstood of all the great modern playwrights. Audiences who go to the theatre expecting to see the work of a literary giant often leave shrugging their shoulders and wondering what all the fuss was about. Because he is so subtle, and because his plays rely on an essential ambiguity that involves both comedy and tragedy, Chekhov has often been misinterpreted.

The resulting productions are often seemingly stale melodramas about 19th century Russian angst, filled with inactive or meandering peasants, noblemen, and intellectuals. Yet properly played, Chekhov is anything but boring or one-dimensional. Tarragon theatre's current production of *Uncle Vanya* is a case in point; it serves as a pleasant reminder of how rivetting Chekhov's drama can really be.

Much of the credit for the success of Tarragon's *Uncle Vanya* must go to the superb direction of Derek Goldby, a veteran of Stratford, Broadway, and English and European theatre, whose credits include a Tony nomination for his work in the original production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. His most recent Toronto appearance was as the director of last year's *Delicatessen*, at Toronto's Free theatre. Here, Goldby and set designer Michael Levine have chosen to remodel the theatre to allow for a multi-levelled central stage, arranged like a cross along the central aisles, and surrounded in all directoins by the audience. The set and the props, with a few notable exceptions, are all painted with a moss green; and though it interferes initially with the realism of the first scene, it ceases to be distracting as the drama continues. The color not only fits with the play's imagery, it helps provide a horizontal context for the actors, something necessary with a central stage.

The set's inherent intimacy, with entrances from all corners of the theatre, the deliberately slow pacing of the dialogue, and the subtle performances of an excellent cast help complete the illusion, giving the audience, at several points extended moments of 'slice of life' naturalism. Reid's Elena and Nora McLellan's Sonya are particularly good in the second act, while David Hemblen (Dr. Astrov) also provides some highly memorable scenes. Though these three seem to shine above the rest of the cast, the others all rise to the occasion when called upon.

What is perhaps more striking than the individual performances, however, is the keen awareness the actors appear to have of each other while on stage. There seems to be a mutual consciousness of the goals of the production; the individual performers take charge at the appropriate moment, then fade into the background as the situation changes. There is no overacting, no upstaging, no exaggerated importance of any particular character in this production. In fact, from the acting point of view, this *Uncle Vanya* is virtually flawless.

Vanya's (Al Kozlik's) attempted murder of Professor Serebriakov (Sandy Webster) in act two is played with the appropriate comedy, as are Vanya's endless histrionics concerning his failure as a human being. Kozlik plays Vanya as he should be played, eliciting humor while at the same time touching the audience with a sense of the Tragicomic as the situation demanded.