

In late May of 1944, American Vice President Henry Wallace visited the city of Magadan in the Soviet Union's Far North East. Wallace asked to inspect a forced labor camp, part of the Gulag system (acronym for *Glavnoye Upravleniya Lagere*, Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps); however, instead of seeing thousands of *zeki* (prisoners of the Gulag), Wallace unwittingly became the center of an orchestrated sham. On orders from Moscow, the camp's guards disguised the city – turning it into a Potemkin village¹. They removed prison watch towers, decorated empty shopfronts with goods, and locked *zeki* in their barracks for the three-day visit. Wallace's tour even included a theatre performance. America had provided aid to the Soviet Union through the Lend-Lease Act to fight Nazi Germany, and the Soviets didn't want to jeopardize that support by exposing their inhumane treatment of *zeki*.

My proposed thesis play, titled *Stitched with a Sickle and a Hammer*, which is the basis for my application for a Named Fellowship, is centered around Wallace's visit. It's the story of twenty-two-year-old Alexandra, a political prisoner serving an eight-year sentence in Magadan. Alexandra joins the camp's theatre troupe, but when she learns that she will be performing for Wallace, she faces a life or death decision. Will she sacrifice her life and reveal she is a *zek* for a moment of true freedom, or comply with the charade and pretend she is a free woman so she can survive her Gulag sentence?

My goal for *Stitched with a Sickle and a Hammer*, is to illuminate a mass tragedy that has not received the same ardent condemnation as other twentieth-century atrocities have. The Gulag incarcerated over 18 million people from 1929 to 1953, and has been described by a former *zek* (prisoner) as “a giant Auschwitz without ovens”². Why then, unlike the Nazi camps, has the Gulag not shaped the Western collective consciousness of what evil looks like? Anne Applebaum, author of *Gulag: A History*, writes, “We do not remember that the camps of Stalin, our ally, expanded just as the camps of Hitler, our enemy, were liberated. No one wants to think that we defeated one mass murderer with the help of another.”³

Alexandra was born into the Soviet regime and embodied its socialist values, but because of her unfair and harsh punishment for what she believes to be an innocent act – reading an article deemed anti-Soviet – her ardent socialist beliefs fall apart.

Before Alexandra is aware of the consequential decision she must make, she faces despair, hunger, and exhaustion in the camp. She learns that the troupe is recruiting members for a special performance and she becomes determined to join. Alexandra knows that the troupe is her only chance for extra food, time off from working the gold mines, and a few precious hours of not wearing a *zek* uniform. Perhaps this is a chance for her to find moments of relief from her captivity? Perhaps if she pretends to be free it's a step closer to her liberation?

During auditions, Alexandra wins over the affections of the troupe's director and despite her lack of experience (compared to imprisoned artists), she's recruited. As the performance looms closer, its real purpose is revealed. Alexandra realizes she has unintentionally signed up for a scheme to deceive Wallace, and the world, that she and *zeki* across the Soviet Union do not exist. Ironically, she prepares for two roles: the character on stage, and the role of an actor who's isn't imprisoned. In the camp, Alexandra learns to loath the regime and its propagators. How can

¹ A Potemkin village is one built solely to deceive others into thinking that a place is better than it really is. The origins of this reference date back to Catherine II while she was the Tsarina of the Russian Empire.

² Birstein, V. “Three Days in ‘Auschwitz without Gas Chambers’: Henry A Wallace’s Visit to Magadan in 1944”. *Wilson Center*, April 2012, www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/three-days-auschwitz-without-gas-chambers-henry-wallaces-visit-to-magadan-1944. Accessed Sept. 2017.

³ Applebaum, A. “Gulag: An Introduction”. victimsofcommunism.org/gulag-an-introduction/. Accessed Sept. 201

she fathom to help the regime, which has taken away her personal freedom, maintain the illusion of Soviet freedom to the world? And yet, she's conflicted; is it worth risking her life to tell the truth, and will the revelation of her real identity change the circumstances for other *zeki*?

Though many survived their Gulag sentence and though Russia has, in part, condemned the Gulag, no one has ever taken responsibility. No Nuremberg trials. No national day of remembrance; at least for those sent to the Gulag unfairly or without a just trial. The omnipresent fear of the repressed Soviets (behaviors as trivial as telling the 'wrong' joke or reading works of non-communist writers could be convicted as acts of dissent) is contained only in history books, silently gathering dust on countless shelves around the world. And perhaps because those books are dusty, Russian leadership remains rife with political repression, claiming national interests as justification for extreme censorship and subjugation.

In *Stitched with a Sickle and a Hammer*, I intend to draw parallels between what happened last century in a totalitarian society, and what can happen to our society today as we edge closer to a totalitarian-like regime. At a time when current Russian-American relations create domestic and international security concerns, a representation of the two nations' fraught co-dependence belongs onstage – a place where appearance and reality begin to unravel.

Equally important, freedom of speech, a right missing from the social and political fibers of repressed nations, is now under threat in America, despite it being a constitutional decree.

According to the 2017 Annenberg Public Policy Center report,⁴ 37 percent of Americans cannot name any First Amendment rights. How can you protect something if you don't know you have it? Perhaps this is one reason why the current American President's rhetoric is alarming. He has started with journalists; labeled them as "sick people" and their institutions "fake news," and called for their imprisonment. Suddenly, the restriction, even revocation, of freedom of speech becomes a real possibility. Could his next targets be playwrights and the theatre? The Gulag's incarcerated population was forty percent political *zeki*, a number which can serve as a sobering illustration of political repression.

The fiery debate to protect freedom of speech has surfaced at Ohio University, when in January 2017 students held a protest in response to the American President's executive foreign travel ban. The student body continues to pressure the University's administration to allow for on-campus activities under the protection of a fair Freedom of Expression policy. For Ohio University, like for colleges across America, the concern is to avoid the deadly Charlottesville protests and as an educational institute maintain a commitment to intellectual diversity.

I am excited to bridge cultural and social divides onstage – both my first and second year MFA plays focused on the cultural and/or religious identities of immigrants in America – because I'm an immigrant twice over (I was born in Russia and grew up in Australia) and I feel it's important to represent other cultures to an American audience. I believe re-examining past events from a foreigner's perspective will help with a deeper understanding of what social and ethical responsibilities first-world countries owe to their citizens and the world. Dr. Steven Miner, specialist in Soviet history at Ohio University, will be helping me conduct research about the Soviet treatment of *zeki* and the regime's propaganda tactics.

Stitched with a Sickle and a Hammer will culminate in a production as part of the Ohio University's 2019 Seabury Quinn, Jr. Playwrights' Festival.

⁴ The Annenberg Public Policy Center is a national communications policy center and part of University of Pennsylvania. Reported published September 2017, www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-are-poorly-informed-about-basic-constitutional-provisions/. Accessed Sep. 2017.