Acting Edition

Vladimir

by Erika Sheffer

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SAMUEL FRENCH

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For my mother, Edith Sheffer.

VLADIMIR is an Edgerton Foundation New Play Commission awarded by Manhattan Theatre Club (Lynne Meadow, Artistic Director; Barry Grove, Executive Producer) and received its world premiere there on October 16, 2024. The production was directed by Daniel Sullivan, with scenic design by Mark Wendland, costume design by Jess Goldstein, lighting design by Japhy Weideman, original music and sound design by Dan Moses Schreier, projection design by Lucy Mackinnon, fight direction by Thomas Schall, hair and wig design by Charles G. LaPointe, makeup design by Ashley Ryan, dialect coaching by Charlotte Fleck, and casting by Caparelliotis Casting and Kelly Gillespie. The production stage manager was James FitzSimmons. The cast was as follows:

RAYA . . . . . Francesca Faridany
KOSTYA . . . . . Norbert Leo Butz
YEVGENY . . . . . David Rosenberg
GALINA . . . . . Olivia Deren Nikkanen
ANDREI . . . . . Erik Jensen
JIM . . . . . Jonathan Walker
CHOVKA . . . . . Erin Darke

VLADIMIR was originally commissioned by Geffen Playhouse (Randall Arney, Artistic Director; Gil Cates Jr., Executive Director).

CHARACTERS

RAYA – a journalist, 40s–50s (Diminutive of RAISA)
KOSTYA – an editor, Raya's boss, 40s–50s (Diminutive of KONSTANTIN)
YEVGENY – a financial analyst, Raya's source, 30s (Diminutive: ZHENYA)
GALINA – Raya's daughter, 20s (Diminutive: GALYA)
ANDREI – a Kremlin official, Kostya's friend, 40s–50s
JIM – an American investor
CHOVKA – a young woman from Chechnya, teens–20s

The following doubling tracks were utilized in the premiere production:
YEVGENY/CAMERAMAN/SASHA
GALINA/DAUGHTER/MASHA/BARTENDER
ANDREI/DIRECTOR/DEACON
JIM/OLD MAN/VITALY/NEWS PERSONALITY
CHOVKA/MAKE-UP LADY/TATIANA/CREW MEMBER/CLERK

SETTING

Various locations in Moscow, Chechnya, and New York

TIME

Prologue: December 31, 1999
Part One: Spring 2004
Part Two: Fall 2004 to Winter 2005

NOTES ON DIALECT

Actors should use their native dialect: American, British, etc. Lines can be altered to suit the cadence of the actor's nationality. The exception is Jim, who is American and must speak with an American accent. Jim is always speaking English to non-native English speakers. When talking to Jim, actors use Russian-accented English, unless otherwise noted.

Jim speaks in an American dialect to identify him as a foreigner. You may find this theatrical device to be ineffective if the company's natural accents are too varied. If this is the case, unity of dialect is an option. Play around, find your way.

For we cannot tarry here,
We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger,
We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend...

"Pioneers! O Pioneers!"
Walt Whitman

PROLOGUE

(Moscow. December 31, 1999.)

(The **OLD MAN** *sits behind a desk, staring into the distance. He holds a glass of cognac. A TV camera is pointed at him. A* **DIRECTOR** *and the* **OLD MAN'S DAUGHTER** *loiter nearby.)*

(A Christmas tree. A military flag.)

VOICE. *(From control booth.)* Two minutes.

DIRECTOR. Okay, everyone, we have two minutes. Two minutes.

(The **OLD MAN** *drinks.)*

The drink.

*(***MAKE-UP LADY** *approaches and attempts to remove the glass. But the* **OLD MAN** *keeps drinking. Takes his time.* **MAKE-UP LADY** *looks to* **DIRECTOR***, unsure.)*

Mr. President. We have to start.

DAUGHTER. Daddy, it's starting.

Daddy.

DIRECTOR.

He needs to get rid of the glass.

You don't want it there.

DAUGHTER.

Give her the drink.

Can you –

DAUGHTER. I heard you! Daddy, give her the drink… Just give her the glass.

(The **OLD MAN** *finishes the drink and hands over the glass.* **MAKE-UP LADY** *passes it off.)*

DIRECTOR. Mariya, his forehead. Does he always sweat like – Can someone turn down the heat!

MAKE-UP LADY. It's not on.

DIRECTOR. Can someone turn on the A/C!

(As **MAKE-UP LADY** *is about to powder his forehead, the* **OLD MAN** *stands.)*

OLD MAN. I have to take a piss.

(Beat.)

DAUGHTER. Are you sure –?

DIRECTOR. We don't have time.

DAUGHTER. Can you hold it?

DIRECTOR. He won't make it back. We're live –

DAUGHTER. *(Vicious.)* I know that!

Daddy, you're going to have to hold it.

You have to. There's no time, every station is cutting to us, you have to hold it.

OLD MAN. I can make it back.

DAUGHTER. How far is the bathroom?

DIRECTOR. He won't make it.

DAUGHTER. How far is / the bathroom?

DIRECTOR. It's down the hall, it's a long hall, we have less than one minute.

DAUGHTER. There's really no time. I'm sorry.

DIRECTOR. He's not centered –

CAMERAMAN. He's standing.

(The **OLD MAN** *sits. He picks up a vase of flowers. He dumps the flowers and urinates into the vase, under the desk.)*

DIRECTOR. Thirty seconds. Mariya. His head.

*(***MAKE-UP LADY** *applies powder to the* **OLD MAN***'s head while he urinates. The* **OLD MAN** *finishes and holds the vase up to* **MAKE-UP LADY**.*)*

Ten seconds.

*(***MAKE-UP LADY** *considers her options. She takes the vase, and exits.)*

Okay, everyone, deep breath. Five, four…

(He counts down silently and points to the **OLD MAN**.*)*

OLD MAN. My dearest Russians. It is just a few moments before the most momentous date in history. The year 2000 is upon us. A new century, a new millennium.

This is the last time I will speak to you as your president.

I am resigning.

Russia must enter the next millennium with new faces, fresh voices, bright energetic men and women. History marches on and Russia will keep moving forward.

(A fuzzy image of the **OLD MAN** *appears, speaking in Russian as the actor continues in English.)*

And there is a good man waiting to lead you, a strong, courageous individual who will shape our future. And so, in accordance with our constitution, I have signed a decree handing over the duties of the president to my prime minister Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.

(The vocals line up on the name. A feeling of an echo.)

OLD MAN. *(In Russian.)* Будьте счастливы, друзья мои. Вы заслуживаете счастья. Вы заслуживаете счастья и мира. *[Be happy my friends. You deserve happiness. You deserve happiness and peace.]*

DIRECTOR. *(In Russian.)* мы закончили *[…We're out.]*

PART ONE

One

(Projection:) Moscow 2004.
Election Night.

(Raya's apartment. Living room and kitchen area. A hallway leads to the bedrooms. One of **RAYA***'s hands is in a cast up to the elbow and she has a bandage on her neck.)*

(On the television, a young Vladimir Putin gives a speech. The audio is in Russian. **RAYA** *sips a drink and watches the speech with contempt.)*

(The buzzer sounds. She presses the intercom.)

RAYA. Hello?

KOSTYA. *(Voice.)* It's Kostya.

RAYA. What are you doing here?

KOSTYA. I'm visiting. Open the door, it's freezing!

*(***RAYA** *buzzes him in. She pulls out an ice cube tray, but she's only got one hand for this maneuver. She slams the tray into the bowl. This doesn't work. Or it does!* **KOSTYA** *enters with* **TATIANA***, who is drunk. She's having trouble standing. He carries a ridiculously large vase of flowers.)*

KOSTYA. Here we are, two more steps.

TATIANA. I forgot my coat.

KOSTYA. You're wearing your coat.

TATIANA. I forgot my hat.

KOSTYA. Did you have a hat, I don't remember.

TATIANA. How can you not remember my hat? Do you even see me? Do you have any idea who I am?

KOSTYA. Darling, you're going to lie down for a bit all right?

RAYA. No.

KOSTYA. Just for a few hours, I couldn't get a car.

RAYA. Do not put her in there. Galina is here for the weekend.

KOSTYA. *(Changing direction.)* Okay.

RAYA. Don't put her in my room!

KOSTYA. She'll be fine in an hour, I promise –

(To **TATIANA***, offstage.)* Darling, listen to me, you're going to lie down for a bit while I go find your hat –

TATIANA. *(Offstage.)* You won't.

KOSTYA. On my life –

TATIANA. Don't promise me things, you're always promising things and you never – Don't promise me anything ever again!

(Beat.)

I'm going to throw up.

RAYA. If she throws up in my bed, I will kill you –

KOSTYA. *(Re-entering.)* She already threw up twice, there's nothing left.

Well, my night took an unexpected turn…

RAYA. Why are you in my home with an embryo?

KOSTYA. She's not an embryo, her name is Tatiana and she's my new assistant.

(Beat.)

RAYA. Can't you just fuck them? Does it really require this much investment?

KOSTYA. You're being very judgmental. This aired hours ago.

RAYA. It's on a loop, they keep replaying it.

KOSTYA. That doesn't mean you have to watch, you still have use of your arms.

*(***RAYA** *holds up her cast.)*

You have the other one.

RAYA. Where are you coming from?

KOSTYA. Khakamada's party.

RAYA. How was that?

KOSTYA. Very sad. They rented the Grand Ballroom at the Hilton.

RAYA. Why? She was polling at two percent.

KOSTYA. I have no idea, there were maybe twenty people there for her concession. Rows and rows of the saddest sushi you've ever seen. Beautiful centerpieces, though.

(He displays the flowers.)

RAYA. This is the fucking problem. This election is a joke, why is everyone playing along? The opponent rents a ballroom, gives a concession speech, as if there was even a possibility she would win. Why waste the fucking sushi?

KOSTYA. It was good sushi.

*(**RAYA** has become fixated on the screen.)*

RAYA. He ascends to the presidency like a fucking czar and four years later he steals an election – I bet his dick is so small.

*(**KOSTYA** pointedly turns off the TV.)*

KOSTYA. Hi.

RAYA. What?

KOSTYA. Your recovery might go a little smoother if you don't give yourself an aneurysm.

RAYA. It's infuriating.

KOSTYA. Okay, but what's the point of driving yourself crazy?

RAYA. It makes me feel better.

KOSTYA. It makes you feel fucking miserable.

RAYA. Yeah, but I like that feeling.

KOSTYA. You're acting like this is a surprise – Come on, look, Ivan the Terrible, pretty bad. Peter the Great, actually terrible. Lenin! He didn't bother with an election either. Stalin, Andropov, another KGB guy –

RAYA. So, because it's happened in the past, it makes it okay?

KOSTYA. No, but it makes it predictable.

How long is Galina in town for?

RAYA. God, too long.

KOSTYA. Stop it, she's the sweetest.

RAYA. Because you're not related to her. You don't know what it's like to be her mother. She's fucking relentless. She's treating me like an invalid. She stands outside the door when I go to the bathroom.

KOSTYA. Why?

RAYA. In case I fall in? I don't know.

I'm going into the office tomorrow.

KOSTYA. You said you'd take your full medical leave.

RAYA. It's a sprained wrist, a couple of burns, I don't need a month for that.

KOSTYA. It's more than a sprained wrist and you know it.

If you're sick of being at home, take a vacation, go sit on a beach somewhere.

RAYA. I have been back from Chechnya for three weeks. I have been a very good girl and it's time to go back to work.

KOSTYA. Okay.

RAYA. It's better if I'm at the office. I'll feel more relaxed, because I'm actually getting something done.

KOSTYA. Okay.

RAYA. Stop saying okay and say what you mean.

KOSTYA. Why don't we speed this up and you can just tell me what I mean?

RAYA. I know you think I should get a fucking massage and sit on my ass for two more weeks –

KOSTYA. Oh, that's what I think, okay.

RAYA. But I really don't have to.

KOSTYA. Then don't.

RAYA. You're not going to argue with me?

KOSTYA. I am not.

RAYA. Good. Because I have something to show you.

(She gets a file folder.)

KOSTYA. No, no, I'm not working right now.

RAYA. There is something here, I can feel it.

KOSTYA. Do not pitch me a story, I am barely sentient.

RAYA. So, my guy at the Tax Authority calls me last week, they got a complaint from an American. He owns an investment firm, small, boutique, name is James Kimball. He said someone used his company to claim a tax refund.

KOSTYA. I'm not listening to you.

RAYA. Guess how much the refund was for.

KOSTYA. No.

RAYA. Guess.

KOSTYA. ...A million rubles.

RAYA. Twenty million.

(Beat.)

KOSTYA. Fuck. Let me see that. *(He peruses the documents.)* Did they open an investigation?

RAYA. No. The American called back the next day, said there was a mistake. *(Beat.)* The money got paid out. Twenty million rubles to an American company, to a tiny American company. It's the largest tax refund in Russian history. That kind of money doesn't get paid out unless someone at the top is getting a cut.

KOSTYA. You think Finance Minister?

RAYA. At least. But I wouldn't be surprised if it went higher.

KOSTYA. ...Okay, that might be something.

RAYA. I'll need to get the tax ID, follow the money – Can you have Darya send me everything on the American, I can try...

*(**KOSTYA** turns on the radio to drown her out.)*

KOSTYA. Tomorrow.

RAYA. This is important.

KOSTYA. Nothing is important at this hour, especially not work.

RAYA. We're not working, we're talking.

KOSTYA. Talking doesn't involve paperwork.

RAYA. Kostya, I'm injured –

*(***KOSTYA** *sings along, finally breaking her resolve.* He pulls her in for a dance and she half-heartedly protests.)*

Oh my God, you stink of liquor.

*(***GALINA** *enters in her pajamas.)*

GALINA. What are you doing?

KOSTYA. My fault. I was nearby and couldn't get a car.

GALINA. *(To* **RAYA**.*)* You're supposed to take it easy.

RAYA. I'm three drinks into my night, how much easier do you want me to take it?

GALINA. And you're not supposed to drink with the painkillers.

KOSTYA. Drinking on painkillers actually improves efficacy. I've done extensive research.

GALINA. *(To* **KOSTYA**.*)* She doesn't need encouragement.

RAYA. She really doesn't.

GALINA. I'm not kidding.

RAYA. She's very serious.

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GALINA. *(To* **KOSTYA**.*)* Did she tell you she went into sepsis last week?

(Beat.)

I got a call, your mother was found passed out at a bus stop. Her burns were infected. I had to get a last-minute flight, get my classes covered. They kept asking at the hospital how it happened, how she got a sulfur burn in the middle of Moscow. I should've given them *your* number. Have them arrest you instead.

KOSTYA. What did I do?

GALINA. You enable her.

RAYA. *(To* **KOSTYA**, *re:* **GALINA**.*)* I told you – Fucking relentless.

GALINA. If you weren't paying, arranging everything, she couldn't go. It's illegal for a journalist to even be in Chechnya on her own.

RAYA. I wasn't on my own, I was with an infantry division.

GALINA. That you abandoned on a regular basis.

RAYA. Well, I mean, yeah.

(Beat.)

GALINA. Let me change your bandage while I'm up.

RAYA. It's fine.

GALINA. It's been four hours.

RAYA. I'll change it before I go to sleep.

GALINA. It's easier if someone else does it –

RAYA. If you want to spend the entire weekend nagging, you need to go stay with your father.

(Beat.)

I'm sorry.

GALINA. It's fine.

RAYA. I'm just tired.

GALINA. *(To* **KOSTYA**.*)* Will you help her with the bandage, it's hard for her to reach – Use a Q-tip when you apply the cream, and you have to wear rubber gloves, the skin's exposed it could get reinfected. Are you drunk?

KOSTYA. I'm completely functional.

Hey, your mom told me about your engagement, congratulations.

(He gives her the centerpiece.)

GALINA. Thank you.

KOSTYA. When's the big day?

GALINA. October 20th.

KOSTYA. Coming right up.

GALINA. Don't say that, I have way too much to do, all of it in Peter, and I've been here every weekend, since she got back –

RAYA. You don't have to.

GALINA. It's for me as much as you.

RAYA. It's for you.

GALINA. Fine it's for me.

Don't let her stay up too late.

KOSTYA. I won't. I'm on my best behavior, promise.

*(***GALINA** *exits.* **KOSTYA** *washes his hands and gets the bandage and cream.)*

RAYA. I'm going back to Chechnya in a few weeks.

KOSTYA. Were you listening to any of that?

RAYA. She'll be fine. She'll get into her schoolwork, her friends. And I'll make it a short trip, two weeks tops.

KOSTYA. You just pitched me a story, a good one. Stay here and work on it.

RAYA. I can write two things at once, I'm very talented.

KOSTYA. We won't be able to clear you. It'll be impossible to find a unit for you to travel with.

RAYA. I want to go on my own this time.

KOSTYA. Jesus fucking Christ.

RAYA. Feds are too much trouble, they don't let you talk to anyone –

KOSTYA. Please don't ask me to help you get arrested, if not shot –

RAYA. I absolve you of all responsibility, you have nothing to do with it. You just have to pay for everything and run the story. You know it'll be good, you really want to pass that up? Kostya… Enable me.

KOSTYA. You should take a break.

RAYA. Is that vomit on your shirt?

KOSTYA. No.

RAYA. All right.

(Beat.)

KOSTYA. Don't make me regret it, okay?

RAYA. Regret what?

KOSTYA. Paying for everything and running the story. Don't make me regret it.

(He pulls back her bandage, revealing a dark burn.)

Two

(Lights shift as **RAYA** *gets her coat and* **KOSTYA** *exits.* **RAYA** *leaves the apartment and spots* **CHOVKA** *standing off to the side.)*

(Projection:) Chechnya.
A memory.

RAYA. Hi.

*(***CHOVKA** *looks around, realizes* **RAYA** *is talking to her.)*

CHOVKA. Hi.

RAYA. Raisa Bobrinskaya. I'm with *Moscow Novosti*. It's a newspaper.

CHOVKA. Never heard of it.

RAYA. It's a Russian newspaper. Do you have a minute to talk?

CHOVKA. I don't talk to Russians.

RAYA. Totally understandable. I wouldn't either if I were you – Do you mind if I stand here? I'm waiting for my driver, he had to run an errand.

CHOVKA. Stand wherever you want.

RAYA. There was an explosion on the 217, IED. If you're waiting for someone it might be a while. It was all back roads this morning, we had to drive thirty kilometers around, which you know, for me it's fine, I get to meet people, listen to their stories… I'll stop talking.

CHOVKA. I don't think you will.

(They wait.)

RAYA. We could give you a ride. We're going to Grozny. I promise I'm harmless – well, irritating according to my daughter, but generally harmless.

CHOVKA. You're kinda funny.

RAYA. What's your name? It doesn't have to be your real name, just something you wouldn't mind me calling you.

CHOVKA. For your story? Do you think I'd be a good character, is that why you want to talk?

RAYA. I don't write about characters, I write about people.

CHOVKA. But sometimes you think of them as characters.

RAYA. I don't.

CHOVKA. Bullshit.

RAYA. I wouldn't be here, risking my life, if I thought of you as a character.

CHOVKA. Oh, so noble. You get paid for risking your life, that's a choice you made.

RAYA. It doesn't always feel like one.

(Beat.)

CHOVKA. Is it worth it?

RAYA. Is what worth it?

CHOVKA. Doing something so utterly pointless with your life?

RAYA. It…it's not pointless.

CHOVKA. Are you sure?

RAYA. I…

CHOVKA. Just go home. We don't matter to anyone.

RAYA. You matter to me.

CHOVKA. Because you're actually here. But if I was on your television, some girl you saw for thirty seconds, would you really care about a war in a place you've never been to, maybe never heard of.

RAYA. No. I'd watch until it got too depressing and then change the channel. Unless. I saw a real person, who told me a real story. A person who made it so I couldn't look away.

CHOVKA. You're pretty good.

RAYA. Thank you.

CHOVKA. My name is Chovka.

RAYA. Raisa. Raya.

CHOVKA. There is something that happened. Something I haven't talked about... I lost my heart. About a year ago.

RAYA. You lost heart.

CHOVKA. No, no, my heart. The organ. The thing that pumps your blood. I don't have one of those anymore.

RAYA. What does that mean?

(A car horn.)

CHOVKA. Your driver's back.

RAYA. What?

*(***RAYA** *looks out, and* **CHOVKA** *exits.)*

Wait! Wait, what does that mean?

*(***RAYA** *exits.)*

Three

(Light shift as **KOSTYA**, **ANDREI**, *and* **VITALY** *enter with drinks and take a seat in a swanky bar.)*

ANDREI. People don't mind getting fucked as long as you use the right lubricant.

KOSTYA. That's what you tell yourself so you can sleep at night.

VITALY. What's the right lubricant? I know it's metaphorical lubricant, but what, like how?

ANDREI. I sleep great. Last night I dreamt I was a matador – I'm in the ring with this bull, he's charging and I trip on my bejeweled slipper. I back up and hit the wall. Bull stops, we share a meaningful exchange and I can feel it. *This bull wants me*. I'm breathing heavy, my amygdala's fucking gyrating –

KOSTYA. And you consider this a good night's sleep.

ANDREI. Well, then he sucks my cock and I wake up feeling great. Made blinis from scratch, squeezed fresh orange juice, my wife was elated.

KOSTYA. She was probably grateful to the bull. Freed up her morning.

VITALY. Andrei Vodka-vich, Konstantin Cognac-ovich –

KOSTYA. Vitaly Full-of-shit-ovich, have a seat so I can stop staring at that massive gut.

ANDREI. It's a beauty.

KOSTYA. Just when I'm convinced no time has passed since university, I'm confronted with this decrepit specimen.

ANDREI. God, when did we get so old?

KOSTYA. *(Raising his glass.)* As always, gentlemen. A pleasure.

VITALY & ANDREI. Cheers, hear, hear, etc.

(They drink.)

KOSTYA. Andrei Karlovich, tell me, what nefarious dealings have you been involved with, lately?

ANDREI. No comment.

KOSTYA. Oh, come on, I've been watching the news.

ANDREI. Why would I tell you anything? So, I can see it twisted around –

KOSTYA. Reported on –

ANDREI. In that pathetic little rag. Nasty, biased –

KOSTYA. Journal. Independent journal.

ANDREI. Let's stick to sports and family –

KOSTYA. I'm sorry, I can't show up to work, look my staff in the eye if I don't at least get a comment on governor appointments.

ANDREI. The Kremlin is pleased that rival parties were able to put politics aside and act in the public's best interest.

KOSTYA. That's what you're going with?

VITALY. That was good. That was really good.

KOSTYA. Three months ago you didn't have the votes to bring it to committee, now it's unanimous? Suddenly having the president appoint governors makes more sense than people actually voting for them.

ANDREI. When you look at local corruption, the bribes –

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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