

literary fiction

Before and During

Novel. Novy Mir. St. Petersburg 1993/ Arsis. Moscow 2009. 426 pages

Publishers: France - Phebus, Italy - Voland, Serbia - Utopia, UK - Dedalus

The novel recounts the failure of the human race to produce God's great play on the stage of the world. Rehearsing means repeating, to perpetually review the play and to try again and again, thereby immortalizing the play throughout the ages. And in this, the theme of the novel evokes the memory of that most infamous rubber stamp „Khranit' vechno" (to be preserved forever) on KGB files. Rehearsals should lead to a premiere, but this does not happen in the novel.

In the 17th century theatre is considered by the church to be the work of the devil. However, in Siberia a bishop campaigns to stage a play about the second coming of Christ. The French director struggles with the illiterate Siberian villagers over the final version of the play and, similar to the passion play at Oberammergau, the chastity and suitability of the inhabitants for the roles of Jews, Romans and Apostles, and above all for that of Judas. A decree demands that the role of Jesus must not be filled, for unlike in Oberammergau, the Siberian village is not rehearsing the Passion, but the incarnate return of the Redeemer. The urgency to stage the play is increased by the fact that the end of the world is prophesied for 1666 and this turns the play into both an invocation and a prerequisite for the second coming of Christ. But, as the end of the world is repeatedly postponed and, for the villagers, takes on multifaceted changeable forms - schism, war, enlightenment, anti-Jewish pogroms, revolution, Stalin's terror, GULAG -, so the premiere is deferred by years, decades, centuries without those involved ever losing their hope or determination. On the contrary, the protagonists manage to pass on trust and confidence from generation to generation. The self-imposed task becomes the justification for existence, the rehearsals become the reason for living.

It is not without reason that, in this secular age, Sharov has set the plot in one of those Old-Orthodox communities that considers itself to be God's last chosen people and believes that their village is the New Jerusalem. With unbelievably realistic attention to detail the novel presents reports of historical witnesses, archive sources, verbal and written memories as if discovered by a contemporary reporter who has analyzed, researched, queried and interpreted them.



THE AUTHOR

translations
10 languages

awards
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2015
Big Book Award 2014
Russian Booker Prize 2014
Proze of the Year 2008
Znamya Prize 2002

samples available
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other works
Rehearsals
Be like the Children

Sharov was born in Moscow in 1952. After graduating from Voronezh University he obtained his PhD in history with a thesis on the 17th century in Russia. His novel „Before and During" published in 1993 evoked heavy polemic responses due to the provoking discussion of the entanglement of communism and religion. In addition to writing Sharov gives guest lectures on Russian history, literature and culture at international universities such as Harvard, Lexington, Cologne, Rome, Zurich, Basle as well as Oxford and Cambridge. He is a member of PEN International. Sharov has passed away in summer 2018.

Vladimir Sharov