Forest Song – press backgrounder

The Lesser-Known Players

(Unless otherwise noted, quotes taken from this document may be attributed to Jennifer Hodges, Director)

**About the playwrigh**t: ‘Forest Song' was originally written in 1911 by Ukrainian playwright Lesya Ukrainka, the pen name of Larysa Petrivna Kosach-Kvitka, who has a fascinating life story all on her own: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lesya_Ukrainka>

My grandmother was born in 1905 not far from where Lesya Ukrainka grew up (and where ‘Forest Song’ takes place). Much of ‘Forest Song’ involves Ukrainian folklore and music from this particular region, and I grew up hearing these stories and songs from my grandmother. The Ukrainian culture is very rich in its folk song tradition, superstition, and symbolism, much of which dates back to Pagan times and springs from the consciousness of a culture that is very close to nature and the seasons. Its cultural traditions are close to my heart, as I was very close to my grandmother (she was like a second mother to me). Finding a good translation of this particular play has been a ‘Holy Grail’ of mine for a very long time.

**About the play**: A forest nymph, Mavka, falls in love with a human boy - and a clash of the spirit and human worlds ensues. Perhaps the closest Western comparison might be ‘Midsummer Night’s Dream’ meets ‘Romeo & Juliet’ - with a surprisingly contemporary environmental message thrown in. It's absolutely delightful, and I’m thrilled to be introducing our local audiences to its lyrical language and its charming cast of characters.

I think one of the most interesting and delightful challenges about staging this play is its “impossible” stage directions. “She dives into the river”; “she turns into a willow”; “he flies in from the sky” are a few more extreme examples, but there are a thousand others that relate to place and time - snow falls, flowers bloom, seasons change, a fire rages, people turn into animals, appear out of tree trunks, and adorn themselves with fireflies like jewels. One of the many reasons Ukrainians never get tired of producing and seeing ‘Forest Song' is the sheer pleasure of discovering how these impossible things are interpreted anew in each production.

**About our translation**: "Forest Song” is without doubt one of the most-beloved works of Ukrainian literature - but it’s virtually unknown in the West, in part because of the challenge of translating the original Ukrainian verse to English. A prior effort in 1950 by Percival Cundy nobly tried to retain the rhyme and rhythm of the original, but the result is so stilted and clunky it’s not surprising to me that it’s rarely produced.

I began seriously searching for a translation about two years ago when we founded The Lesser-Known Players, because it seemed the perfect play for us - a great story; a female playwright; lots of great roles for women; a strong female romantic lead that rivals Shakespeare’s Juliet in her challenge and complexity; and a "Lesser-Known" play and playwright by any measure - just to name a few.

The dearth of choices led me to contemplate a new translation - so I reached out to friends and relatives in Ukraine, one of whom connected me with Victor Morozov, who translated the Harry Potter books into Ukrainian. Victor was very excited to hear such a thing was in the works, but felt he wasn’t up to the task, as his strength is English-to-Ukrainian, and not the other way around. It was he who connected me, finally, to Virlana Tkacz of Yara Arts Group in New York City. Yara’s translation, developed under a grant from the National Theatre Translation Fund, is the one we’re using.

Here’s a link to info about the original show: <http://www.brama.com/yara/song-review.html>. Tkacz and Phipps’ translation abandoned the verse to focus on the story; I think much to its benefit. It adheres to the original in spirit without forcing the rhyme and sacrificing the flow of the work.

When I originally reached out to Virlana about licensing her script, her first question was: “Why?" I knew right then that this was going to be a script worth doing - because she cared so much, even years later, that it would be reproduced with careful hands. I am deeply honored that she considered LKP’s credentials and motives carefully and allowed us to license it for production in the Pacific Northwest. Our production is the first of this particular translation outside of New York.

Finally, I’m especially excited to be staging this translation of the original work right now, this year. Ukraine is much in the news, of course, but more importantly, a ‘Forest Song’ video game and animated film are in development for release within the next year or so. So I see this as an opportunity to introduce our local audiences to the original play and characters before they're presented (and I fear watered-down) for mass-market consumption.

(Here’s the video game: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhW3UzCXMC4> And here’s the film: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt6685538/>)

**About our production:**One delightful surprise for me about the play was the ease of casting it. In every case, I’ve found the perfect local actor to inhabit each character, and it’s been just a tremendous pleasure to see them fall as deeply in love with the play and characters as I have. Our Mavka, Solomia Bishko, is a singer from L’viv. Solomia brings a depth of understanding to her role that has informed our production greatly and has been a real asset to the entire cast. The experience of participating in this work has been a fascinating opportunity for all of us to gain a deeper understanding of Ukrainian culture and traditions, especially for those members of the cast who had no prior background in the culture whatsoever. It is my hope that they will carry this new understanding forward, not only to our audiences but also to the general public after our production ends.

Music is integral to Ukrainian culture, to this play, and also to LKP’s ongoing mission to bridge the music and theatre communities locally. So Jon Brenner’s original score, based on folk music from the Volyn region that the playwright Ukrainka included with her original script, is the icing on this cake. I encourage you to reach out to Jon about his score and his experience working with us and developing it so far. His email address is jonbrenner415@gmail.com. Jon will be playing his music live on keyboard, and recorder during our performances.