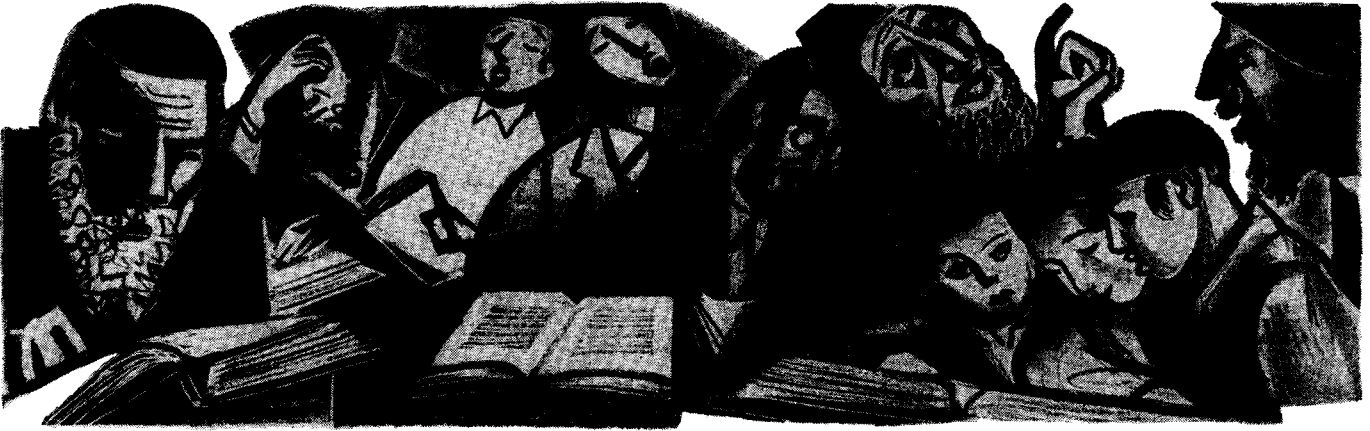


VIEWS & REVIEWS



'With a Tallis, I Can Die'

PATRICIA BLAKE

"**H**OW IN THE WORLD do you expect to make contact with the Orthodox community in Russia?" asked the New York rabbi to whom I had come for advice. "You don't look Jewish, you don't act Jewish, you don't talk Jewish—and besides, you're a woman. For that reason alone, Orthodox men won't have anything to do with you." I agreed it was probably hopeless. Then the rabbi had an idea. "Take some *tallisim*, the shawls Jews wear when they pray; they are priceless in Russia. Present them to the rabbis in the synagogues. They will probably have a few words with you then."

Three days later I landed at Moscow's Vnukovo Airport carrying a parcel that greatly puzzled a customs official. "*Komu eto nuzhno?* Who needs that?" he asked, fingering a dozen identical black-and-white woolen shawls. "I do!" I answered, hugging myself and shivering. "I'm cold-blooded. What miserable weather in Moscow!" He concurred about the weather; it was fifteen degrees below zero. I got through with my shawls.

During the next six weeks I left the *tallisim* locked in a suitcase in my hotel room while I went about other business. I had come to Russia to write a series of articles on various religious faiths, and knowing the sus-

ceptibility of Soviet officials on the Jewish question, I decided to start with Christians. I reasoned that if I were to tangle with the authorities, it would be best to do so toward the end of my assignment.

The time passed agreeably. I interviewed metropolitans in cloth-of-gold vestments, chatted with bejeweled bishops, and exchanged wishes for peace and friendship with tonsured deacons. I visited the resplendent monastery and theological school at Zagorsk, and two fine convents in Kiev. At the fourth-century Holy See of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Echmiadzin, I inspected a brand-new printing press for theological literature, donated by Armenian-Americans. As Easter approached I marveled at the great banks of hothouse flowers massed before the splendid gilded altars of Russia's cathedrals.

THEN one Saturday morning I attended the first Jewish Orthodox service of my life, in one of Moscow's three synagogues. This was a small ramshackle wooden structure in the center of a muddy courtyard. I climbed upstairs at once to the gallery where women are kept separated from men by ritual law. Here some twenty middle-aged and elderly

women crowded around me; when I told them I was an American Jew, they squeezed and petted me. My ignorance of Yiddish did not bother them a bit. "Our young people don't know it either," said one, stroking my hair. They questioned me in Russian. By chance did I know their relatives in Brooklyn, in the Bronx, in Chicago? Anyway, would I get in touch with them and tell them they were alive and safe? Was there as much anti-Semitism in America as in Russia? Would there be war? Had Dulles been a Jew? My astonishment at this last question was matched by their disappointment at my answer. How they had trusted him, believed in him! Some form of the word "Dulles," it seemed, means "poverty" in Yiddish. When they asked for confirmation of Eisenhower's, Rockefeller's, and Harriman's Jewishness, I did not have the heart to deny it. They had personal questions for me, too. What did my father do? Where was I staying in Moscow? Was I married? My reply to this last question provoked a chorus of horrified "Oi! And why not?"

Downstairs in the men's part of the synagogue, the atmosphere was not nearly so heartening. A score of bearded, weary-looking old men sat huddled in their overcoats. A few wore tattered remnants of *tallisim*. Some were reading from oilcloth-bound prayer books which, I later noted, dated from the last century. Instead of the traditional black *yamulkas*, they wore scruffy fur hats or brightly patterned Central Asian skullcaps that cost only a few rubles at any Moscow department store. They sat on wooden benches swaying

in prayer. Occasionally a man would rise and stride up and down the aisle, voicing a series of anguished-sounding cries.

After the service I made my way downstairs. Here I was greeted with looks of unconcealed hostility. As a woman, I knew I was not welcome in the synagogue proper. As a plainly identifiable foreigner, I evidently spelled trouble for the congregation. Nevertheless I approached the rabbi, who was rocking back and forth in his pulpit under a bare light bulb. "What do you want?" he asked loudly. I said that I wanted nothing; I was a Jewish woman from New York who had brought him a present. A *tallis*. I held the package out to him. "If you are a Jewish woman from New York, you should know that you cannot carry packages on the Sabbath. Besides," his voice rose to a shout, "we want for nothing in the Soviet Union! We have everything we need in the Soviet Union. Everything, you understand, everything!"

I retreated, appalled by this demonstration of fear. Then the rabbi called me back, softly now. "Since you have brought a *tallis*, it would be absurd to take it away," he reasoned with fine Talmudic logic. "Please put it on the bench beside you and leave us alone."

EARLY IN THE EVENING of that same Sabbath I sat at my dressing table in my hotel room, putting polish on my fingernails. Thoroughly unsettled by the morning's events, I was concentrating on the evening ahead: a dinner party and dance at the British embassy. I had put on a strapless red satin dress and long, tinkling rhinestone earrings. Frank Sinatra crooned familiarly on my short-wave radio, and I hummed along with him. When a knock on the door roused me from these diversions, I hobbled to the door in my short sheath skirt, waving my hands to dry my nails.

On the threshold stood a tiny bearded old party wearing an ankle-length brown leather coat. From under his outsize black felt hat flowed luxuriant white earlocks. Standing waist-high to me in my spike heels, this astonishing person addressed me in a torrent of Yiddish. I caught one word: *tallis*. Some of my woman friends in the synagogue had

evidently told him where I was staying, and he had come to plead for one of the shawls in which Orthodox Jews have for centuries wrapped themselves at the time of prayer and at the time of death. For this he had braved the cordon of militiamen and secret police around my Intourist hotel, and allowed himself to be observed by one of the floor matrons who take note of all comings and goings. And he was fated to leave the hotel empty-handed. I could not risk his being searched at the door; we might both be arrested for black-marketeering in religious articles. How would I be able to prove I had not sold him a shawl?

Yet there was nothing to do but invite the old man in. He refused to take off his coat and hat, but when I offered him some Scotch he poured



himself a glass and drank it in one shot, like vodka, sweat coursing down the creases of his face. We sat in silence for a long, excruciating moment, while my tight dress crept up above my knees. I felt utterly naked. By puritanical Soviet standards I knew I looked strictly *nekulturny*, and to this old gentleman I supposed I appeared a scarlet woman. His eyes were lowered as he repeated, in Russian, his request for a *tallis*. In answer, I pointed to the ventilator in the ceiling, where I suspected bugging apparatus might be concealed, then cupped my hands over my ears.

"Are you telling me this place is full of spies!" he yelled. "Don't you suppose I know all about it? What can they do to me? I'm seventy-four years old. I'm retired; I've no job to be fired from. My whole family was killed by the Germans. With a *tallis*, I can die." I fetched a piece of paper

on which I fixed a rendezvous with him elsewhere. He would have a shawl, I wrote.

CONTENT with this promise, the old man wanted to chat. When I had covered my nakedness with a coat, he told me that his granddaughter would have been about my age now, had she lived. Wouldn't I like to come home with him and have a nice Jewish dinner? Gefilte fish and *tsimmes*? This very night even! I refused gently, sorrowfully, whispering that we would undoubtedly be followed. And indeed, some people were already taking an interest in our encounter. During the next half hour certain members of the hotel staff, unbidden and without knocking, entered my room with master keys. The maid exchanged one set of clean towels for another; the waiter made the same maneuver with glasses; the bellboy brought me a copy of *Evening Moscow*; the plumber, to whom I had vainly appealed for two days, appeared with a plunger and began draining the bathtub in long, sickening gurgitations.

During this last intrusion I told the old man about a western newspaperman in Moscow who uses his talents as a mimic to bemuse the hotel staff. Alone in his room, he carries on conversations with himself in a variety of accents and intonations, thus provoking frenzied forays by the personnel. The old man seemed to get the point at last. He rose and gave me a warm, reassuring smile and a not so reassuring farewell: "Don't worry, little lady," he said, "I'll come back."

He came. And so did, at my reckoning, ten others—all on the same mission. Some missed me; in the evenings when I returned to the hotel after dinner, the floor matron would often greet me with a deadpan "Another Jew was here to see you tonight." All those I met got their *tallisim* in one way or another, and then dropped out of sight. Only my first visitor was faithful. He appeared again and again at my door, usually around midnight, with gifts: a small jar of chicken fat, a bag of sugar-coated cranberries, a can of herring, and, during Passover, great boxes of hard-to-get matzos which I kept, uneaten, on the top shelf of my closet. "Why are you so thin?" he would

scold. "Eat! Does your mother realize that you're running around all over the world by yourself, not eating enough to keep a nightingale alive?"

Friends by now, the old man and I grew philosophical about our troubles. He had been questioned by the police and then released. As for me, after his first visit I had been continually tailed by plainclothesmen in cars and on foot. Moreover, the authorities were being unusually unco-operative about granting me permission to travel or to visit places not on the Moscow tourist circuit. "Nu," mused the old man, "so maybe you've entered the Pale?"

ON MY LAST NIGHT in Russia the old man came to say good-by, carrying a package somewhat larger than usual. He unwrapped it and presented me with a pair of enormous gray felt carpet slippers. "Here," he said, "when you return to New York, marry a nice Jewish

boy. Make a good home for him. These slippers will be more comfortable in the kitchen than those," and he pointed at a pile of high-heeled shoes I had been packing.

I leaned over and hugged him. "Moya dochka, my daughter," he whispered, "I shall miss you." I felt the whole of his frail little person sobbing against me.

"But I'll come back to Russia soon," I said consolingly. "You'll see, we'll meet again."

He broke from my embrace and, throwing his head back, uttered a single aching wail. "No! No!" he shouted. Then for a moment my gentle gnome loomed before me like a formidable patriarch. "Give me your father's address," he commanded. I obeyed. "I shall write your father and tell him to forbid you to return to Russia." He strode to the door. "Sholom aleichem, peace be with you," he said, and without a backward look he let himself out. «»

The Small White Way

GERALD WEALES

ONE of the more familiar bromides about off-Broadway theater is that it has developed an economics that makes the hit-or-flop mentality as inevitable there as it has been on Broadway ever since the end of the Second World War. Occasionally an off-Broadway play can hang on long enough to build a respectable word-of-mouth reputation, but for the most part the downtown producers, like their uptown brothers, lean heavily on the verdict of the reviewers. Plays that cannot make it big decide not to make it at all and let themselves be blown away by the first critical wind. The shows with rich reviews deck themselves in glamorous quotes and plan to run forever. They have the record of *The Threepenny Opera* to shoot at; kids who were too young to go to the Brecht-Weill musical when it opened are still able to catch it when they come into New York for their college holidays.

Inevitably, off-Broadway has acquired some of the less attractive trappings of hit-consciousness. The

most obvious one is a kind of snobishness that infects its audiences. There was a time when off-Broadway playgoers were likely to be genuine theater enthusiasts, intent on seeing a play that could not be done elsewhere; this group still helps fill off-Broadway houses, but an increasing number of people turn up because it is now the thing to do. Just as the conscientious Broadway playgoer must have seen *The Best Man* and *The Tenth Man*, so his off-Broadway counterpart (often it is the same person) must have been to *The Balcony* and *Krapp's Last Tape*, on one hand, and on the other to *Leave It to Jane* and *Little Mary Sunshine*. There is an obvious difference between these two hands—between, say a revival of a 1917 Jerome Kern musical (*Leave It to Jane*) and a bitter, brothel-centered comedy about the pretensions and imperfections of man and society (*The Balcony*)—but they can be nicely homogenized under a single label: hit.

One result of the long runs that follow the good reviews and the

well-placed publicity is that the playgoer can never be sure what kind of production he is going to see. The reviewers may have assured him that a particular show is sprightly and charming (*Leave It to Jane*, say) and he may get there only to find it frenetically exhausted. I saw the Kern revival months after the opening, and it looked to me rather like an average college production of a standard musical. On Broadway, too, hit shows tend to get tired and sloppy, but off-Broadway the process is likely to set in more quickly. One reason, of course, is that casts change frequently as well-reviewed actors leave for Broadway or Hollywood jobs, or take time off to rehearse for television appearances. Some productions manage to hold their own against the ravages of time and money; both *Little Mary Sunshine* and the double bill of *Krapp's Last Tape* and *The Zoo Story* have been around for more than a year, and both were looking very well when I saw them recently.

Unless there is someone around (preferably the director) to hold a show together, the result can be disastrous. *The Balcony* is a case in point. There are staunch individualists around who insist that the production of Jean Genêt's play was never very good; still, it could hardly have received any favorable critical notice if it had been as abysmal at its opening as it was when I saw it a few weeks ago. The acting was unbelievably bad; there was no evidence of intelligent direction (I am thinking particularly of an interminable conversation in which the two participants moved meaninglessly from chair to chair to chaise longue); the props and costumes were torn and dirty. A producing organization that has done as good work as the Circle in the Square and a director with José Quintero's reputation should be a little nervous about having their names associated with such a production.

As the audience streamed out of the theater in disgust, long before the play was over, minor management functionaries stood smugly smiling in the lobby, safe in their assumption that we were all little old ladies from Rye shocked by Genêt's bluntness; there was shock all right, but it had to do with pay-