



*This Time, This Place*

## Far More Than Farce

by Manfred Wolf

**D**uring the height of the tensions between the Soviet Union and China – two supposed allies against the US in the Cold War – occasional academic exchanges between the US and each country took place.

At San Francisco State, sometime in the Seventies, a certain Yuri Kovalyov from Leningrad University came on a one-year appointment as Professor of Comparative Literature.

A few months into his appointment, Kovalyov gave a public lecture. Since attendance at public lectures was generally poor, I remember being astonished at the great number of people in that auditorium. Many teachers must have required their students to attend.

The Chairman of the host department, a distinguished Chinese-American scholar and artist named Kai-yu-Hsu, introduced him, and that's when the strangeness of the afternoon started.

Hsu, who in his eminent career had introduced many people, appeared to be overcome with excitement.

What should have been a three-minute presentation of the Soviet scholar's biography stretched out to ten, twenty, then thirty minutes. Kovalyov, sitting on the podium, his short

legs crossed, his facial expression a little less dour than usual, looked puzzled, but must have thought that this was the American way.

Hsu continued to enthuse, saying a few times in a kind of chant that "Kovalyov is here!" and I recall too his saying, "It's only at San Francisco State that a Russian and a Chinese scholar can meet face to face."

Some faculty members smiled politely, and the students by this time seemed too bored to care or even listen. Besides, it wasn't clear that they were deeply aware of the Sino-Soviet split, as it was called then.

At about a quarter to the hour, Hsu was done, and Kovalyov started reading from his lengthy, handwritten text.

I do not recall much, except that he spoke in a rather florid, textbookish way and at a certain point said, "and now we come to your own Edgar Poe."

"He left out Allan," whispered the young women in front of me.

Exactly on the hour, that is, about fifteen minutes into Kovalyov's speech, the students got restless, gathered up their books, and in little clumps started leaving.

The hour being over, they had served their time. Besides, they had a class to go to. Within minutes two-thirds of the audience was gone.

Kovalyov looked up and droned on.

"Why," once asked my teacher Irving Howe, "are academic novels so often farcical?"

I now forget Howe's answer, but I can think of a reason or two. The professoriate tends to take itself very seriously, and there is a huge disparity of interests between faculty and students. That's fertile ground for farce.

But, of course, academic novels are far more than farcical.

My favorite in this genre, Vladimir Nabokov's "Invitation of a Friend," not only portrays the absurd, Chaplinesque doings of the Russian emigre Professor Pnin, but also his tragedy.

The novel is funny and immensely sad in its depiction of the rootless exile forever seeking the peace he has lost.

And, not coincidentally, it is suffused with affection for America, that strange, enticing bulwark against European catastrophes in the twentieth century, with its many kind, good-natured people, who entrust their children to odd refugees with odd ideas, and who provide the sunlit classrooms that favor what a more ruthless continent disparaged, welcoming exiles and visitors alike.

So what happened to our visitor Kovalyov? Don't know.

As for Kai-yu-Hsu, he came to a sad end, his love of beauty proving fatal. During the great, flooding rainstorms of 1982, he attempted to rescue his much-loved calligraphy collection from the basement of his Sausalito house, and drowned.

*West Portal Monthly* columnist Manfred Wolf's most recent book is called "Almost a Foreign Country."