

Tiger Milk-a play in 3 acts

by David Ackley

CHARACTERS:

OSIP MANDELSTAM — poet
NADIA MANDELSTAM — wife of Osip
ANNA AKHMATOVA — poet, married to Nikolai Gumilev, a fellow poet and political prisoner in the Lubyanka Prison
OLD LADY
JOSEF STALIN (nee' Osip Dughashvili)- despot
ZENKEVICH — one-time poet, Bolshevik Party flunky
GUSEV, VIC, VANKA, BLIUMKIN — secret police agents, assassins
MARINA TSVETAeva — poet
ALEXEI TOLSTOI — writer, functionary of the Writers' Union
MAXIM GORKI — writer
VYSHINSKI — Government Minister
KROPOTKIN — police spy, rube
FRIENDS OF MANDELSTAM — (2)
SPECTATORS AT SHOW TRIAL

Act I

Scene 1

A small room furnished with a single bed against the wall, a table, one chair. MANDELSTAM, standing, NADIA seated. Above left, outside the room, STALIN and GUSEV, faces suspended in darkness.

GUSEV — Subject is reported to have written, said or possibly thought as follows—understood that I only submit his foul, treacherous words at your express direction:

MANDELSTAM — Imagine the poem written with a pistol at your head. Describing the forbidden as it should be, objectively, truly, with absolute disregard for the lying facts of the case. One who, if

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not the most powerful person on earth, at least is in that peculiar portion called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, formerly the Empire of Russia...with his armies of spies,eavesdroppers, inquisitive neighbors, overly curious acquaintances, trash pickers, hounds and doorlatch lickers, from whose million-eyed stare nothing escapes deadly scrutiny. Not a missive, message, whisper or poem passed mouth to ear of a loyal recorder...

NADIA — As we do.

MANDELSTAM — As we do. Perhaps a poem not written, spoken or even thought, but only anticipated, a poem that might have been. But still advanced in defiance of discovery, under pain of death, which assured of such a consequence, takes that as its imperative and finds it precisely the reason to exist: How could that possible be a bad poem? How could it be anything other than masterwork?

NADIA — (*Dryly.*) Are we to look forward to this? You're not thinking of such a poem, are you?

MANDELSTAM — Me? God forbid! I was only offering a hypothetical.

NADIA — For a suicide?

MANDELSTAM — I'm the least likely to write such a poem. I haven't written anything in years. Was I once a poet? I hardly even remember that man. He's like a distant relative one knows only by bad reputation, the outcast of the family.

STALIN — Then he's NOT writing this poem?

GUSEV — So he says. Note, however, that he conceives it. But who can say? He's obscure. Nobody in Third Section can make sense of what he's already written, poems like drunken babble or the ravings of a lunatic. But that goes for all these so-called modernists, Gumilev and his gang.

STALIN — I thought we took care of Gumilev.

GUSEV — Of course we did...as we should the rest, his whore wife, Akhmatova. Pasternak. That fool, Zenkevich. We should shoot them all for polluting the glorious language left them by Pushkin.

STALIN — Who tells you it's Pushkin's language?

GUSEV — Not that I read his crap...Poets—what are they good for?

STALIN — I like a bit of Gospodin. (*Recites.*)

Over the mountain

On his fine white steed

Comes the Cossack of the Caucasus

The horse-cocked Cossack of the Caucasus.

Laughs, straight-faced.

GUSEV — (*Waits, then, hesitantly, joins in.*) Hahaha.

STALIN —

Glares as GUSEV continues laughing.

All right. Why are you wasting my time with this hopflea? Do what you do to get his attention. What's next?

MANDELSTAM — My God, I'm starved. Who can compose in this condition? All I see are beets, cabbages and pelmeni. Don't get too near. I may be dangerous, anything moving attracts my ravenous gaze.

NADIA — You're like Chaplin's mate in "The Gold Rush." Lie down. Save your strength.

MANDELSTAM — It's true. You are starting to resemble a roast chicken. Not a very plump one, sadly enough.

Lies down on the bed, facing the wall.

Is this blanket wool? It smells of mutton...Perhaps, if we...No. Never mind.

(*Mutters something.*)

NADIA — What?

MANDELSTAM — (*Shouting.*) I said : SAUSAGE FINGERS!

NADIA — For god's sake, Get Some Sleep!

GUSEV — (*Knocking.*) Open at once for the Third Section.

NADIA — (*Cracking the door.*) What do you want?

GUSEV — A word with the poet, Mandelstam.

NADIA — He's sleeping. He can't be disturbed.

GUSEV — Surely a poet can spare a word.

NADIA — Clever, but not enough to wake him.

GUSEV — You've had all my wit. You don't want what follows.
Open up. Now!

NADIA — Please come in. We're honored, whoever you're
claiming to be.

GUSEV — Comrade Gusev, Third Section.

NADIA —

Waving toward MANDELSTAM.

The poet himself...Me...myself.

MANDELSTAM —

Rolls over and sits up.

Ah, the grocer's assistant. Have you brought the loaf of bread and
butter? Pay the fellow, Nadia.

GUSEV — Butter and grocers' boys? What bourgeois fantasy is
this? Where you're headed they butter the bread with weevils.

MANDELSTAM — Honored inspector, please forgive me. I just
woke from a dream of banquets...I should have known you weren't
the grocer's boy, since we no longer have grocers.

GUSEV-

*Smiling, takes an automatic from his overcoat pocket, chambers a
round and stands with the pistol pointed at the floor.*

(Softly.) You do not know who I am, intelligentsia turd. I am the
grocer's boy with the authority—right here, right now—to put bullet
in that poetic brain and send all your fancy words dribbling through
floor cracks. And one more for the skinny cunt. Somebody comes,
rolls you two in old carpet, and puts you where the sun don't shine.
You know what, piece of shit? None of your intelligentsia buddies on
fire for next precious word is going to ask about you or ever say your
name no more. I will wipe you like wiping my ass off face of the
earth—poetry, reputation, cunt and all. Osip Mandelstam. Osip
Nil...Nil Nil. *(Kisses his fingers and blows.)* Byebye.

MANDELSTAM — *(Terror struck.)* What do you want with me?

GUSEV — Lucky for you this is not today's duty... maybe some
other time I have this pleasure. Today I come with message from
esteemed General Secretary and Beloved Leader who gives his
blessing on your work of poetry. He decrees that art in service of

glorious revolution and building of socialist state is of high value. Not so high as filthy coal miner in deepest dark Siberia hole bringing up one rock of coal to burn for one instant in steel mill but of high value all the same. He wishes you to continue writing obscure dilettante poetry on approved state subjects: Victorious Revolutionary Party; Productive factory worker. Robber capitalist oppression of brother America and Europe worker. All other approved subjects can be found on list at offices of Writers' Union...Writing on any other subject is forbidden and subject to finding guilty of crime against state, execution and public trial...Sorry. First trial, THEN execution.

MANDELSTAM —

Somewhat calmer but still eyeing GUSEV'S pistol.

I don't believe what you've said applies to my work. I no longer write poetry, but when I did, I assure you, it had no subject.

GUSEV —

At first baffled then outraged.

What is this, "no subject?" Of course it has subject. Who writes without subject...How could you...? So tell me what your so-called poem is about.

MANDELSTAM- 'About' nothing but itself. It just was.

GUSEV — Hah! Was What?

MANDELSTAM - Just was. Like a stick is a stick. Or a stone a stone. They aren't 'about' something else, they're just themselves.... Like a loaf is...

NADIA — Again with the food.

GUSEV — I...um...ah.

Returns pistol to his coat pocket.

On behalf of beloved leader, I am authorized to say to the poet, Osip Mandelstam, that if he is ever writing poem which will have subject, IT..to speak of the subject of this poem which he maybe sometime is going to write...This subject must then, at this time, come from list...approved list.

Pauses to contemplate himself sinking in the swamp of his rhetoric.

Fucking poet. I should have shot him before he opens his mouth.

Exits.

Act I

Scene 2

A little later. MANDELSTAM re-enters the room where NADIA is putting on a coat and kerchief. He takes an envelope from his jacket pocket and lifts the loose flap with his finger.

MANDELSTAM — They no longer bother to seal it after they've read it.

NADIA — They wish us to know.

MANDELSTAM — I expect the snooping. It's the rudeness that annoys me. I'm sure German secret police are much more civil than ours.

NADIA — Likely more civil and more efficient. This may not be preferable.

MANDELSTAM — Yes. A nice distinction. Do you want your dirty work neat as a razor or blatant as a lead pipe? Gusev of the lead pipe school, I believe.

Takes a sheet from the envelope and glances down it.

It's from Platonov. He writes, " On the farm, the sheep are in constant panic as the howling wolves close. Being sheep, they are unable to distinguish between wolves and shepherd..." No doubt that refers to himself. His students must be making trouble. He says, " I was reminded of a certain agricultural commentary on this very subject..." I've no idea what *that* means...

NADIA — I'd love to help interpret your inscrutable friends but I have to be off if we're to eat anything at all today.

MANDELSTAM — (*Absently.*) I'll be here. Good luck.

Nadia kisses him lightly on the cheek and exits.

They've been after him to teach the *approved* version, but Platonov won't give an inch. As if history offers *versions* he says, from the one set of events to be faithfully recorded. Anything else is either fiction or inadequate research...But I wonder what

agricultural comment...Hah! Of course! It's That poem! Hadn't thought of that one in a while...How does it start now?

Paces, muttering a couple of lines, then breaking off to think. When he has it he stops in the center of the room facing front.

Aroused, old ewes, ebony Chaldeans,
thousands as one,
they flow across the knolls.

Demons in black cowls
like uprisen plebians.

Shag-kneed, they shiver and run...

ZENKEVICH bursts through the door without knocking, realizes he has interrupted and is instantly apologetic.

Speaking of sheep...

ZENKEVICH - Please, please...no intent to interrupt. But where is your audience? ...let me provide it then...Is this a new?... no, I have recognized the phrases, one of your finest... go on, please, Osip, such a joy to hear it from your own lips after so long.

Gesturing frantically, takes the chair and waits for MANDELSTAM to resume.

MANDELSTAM —

Shrugs and resumes his recital of the poem.

Like balls...no, I cut that line.

It's their very own Rome they seek

A seven-hilled pasture, and their own tsar...

ZENKEVICH — *(Interrupting as if MANDELSTAM has come to the end of the poem, nervously clapping.)* Yes, Bravo, Bravo...truly one of your finest. The rhyme of tsar and air so original.

MANDELSTAM — Talk of rhyme is the refuge of the timid, Zenkevich. Say what you wish, my feelings won't be hurt.

ZENKEVICH — Not a criticism my friend, but a caution for your own welfare. Using the word tsar and the people as sheep seeking him, these are dangerous images in these times.

MANDELSTAM — To sheep from people is no great leap. As to tsars, they say the current resident of the Kremlin studies Ivan the Terrible for tips on governance and regal trappings.

ZENKEVICH — Please, Osip, these are things that shouldn't be thought, much less spoken. It's not good to be so original. You should hesitate before you speak in this way...many eyes are watching.

MANDELSTAM — What? That fly on the wall? Let's change the subject to calm your nerves. What's become of the poem that Stalin commissioned on the building of the White Sea Canal? Didn't he send you and Maxim Gorky to the Arctic Circle to soak up the atmosphere? What was it like watching half-starved prisoners claw the frozen ground with their naked fingers? Edifying? Politically inspiring?

ZENKEVICH —

Distressed, torn between his desire for MANDELSTAM'S respect and his wish to be loyal to the state he so abjectly serves.

I know you wish to be ironic...It's hard for them to display it, but these men are committed body and soul to this historic endeavor.

MANDELSTAM — Yes, hard, when their faces are as frozen as the ground they scrape. But, really. This is repulsive. For you to condone such atrocities in the name of history. You're a despicable creature, Zenkevich, with nothing left of the poet I once knew.

ZENKEVICH — Yes, yes, of course you're right...but what can one do? We must do as the state requires, willingly, gladly...But you know, before I go, I wonder if you'd copy that poem for me. It saddens me to have nothing of yours, not an autograph, or a scrap of writing, yet here we are, the oldest of friends and fellow poets...Please?

MANDELSTAM — (*Turning away.*) He's like a mourner asking for a memento of the departed.

ZENKEVICH — Do you know, they took Gumilev away and I have nothing of his either, not a word in his hand to remember him by. It's terrible.

MANDELSTAM — I'm sure as he rots in the Lubianka, it must add unspeakably to his distress that he's left you bereft of souvenirs. But you should be more cautious yourself. Think what it would mean if you were caught with the work of two banned poets on your person. They might put all three of us in the same cell to spy on each other.

Small dark creatures begin to spill from ZENKEVICH'S ears and spread across his countenance.

What's that? What's happening to you?

ZENKEVICH —

Brushing frantically and spitting out the insects running merrily in and out of his ears, mouth and nostrils, spreading over his features.

I think it's all the slogans I've had to learn since I proclaimed my loyalty to the party. They've fully occupied my mind and now they've run out of room.

MANDELSTAM — I'm afraid you'll have to remove them and their habitat. We already have our quota of lice and roaches. Not to speak of bedbugs.

ZENKEVICH — (*Distraught.*) Please, before I go, perhaps you'd repeat your poem for me so I could jot it down.

MANDELSTAM — (*Pity allaying a little his contempt.*) You don't really want that, Zenkevich.

ZENKEVICH —

Wailing, swatting helplessly at his swarming tenants.

No, you're right ...damn you little beasts, get back inside...no, I don't want that at all. I feel terrible.

He rushes out.

MANDELSTAM —

Dismissing Zenkevich from mind instantly, he begins to pace.

There are those sausage fingers again...a cockroach with a mustache...a mustachioed cockroach...Merde! Where did that come from? Shut up, fool! They're already measuring us for coffins.

A soft knock. MANDELSTAM goes to the door and steps aside to admit AKHMATOVA, both smiling, she touching his arm.

AKHMATOVA — Wasn't that...?

MANDELSTAM — The bard of the White Sea Canal.

AKHMATOVA — Ah, Canalski, himself. I thought that was him. He was disturbed.

MANDELSTAM — No doubt. His head is infested with insects.

AKHMATOVA — (*Barely interested.*) Whose is not?

MANDELSTAM - Not, for the most part, in the skull cavity. They seem to be nested in his brain or its former quarters. He says they're political slogans but I'm convinced it's a new species similar to roaches but smaller. Very quick. In there and setting up shop before you know it.

AKHMATOVA — It sounds correct...But listen. I ran into Nadia in the street. She'll probably be late. She heard a rumor a government store had rice...or perhaps toilet paper and was racing to get in line.

MANDELSTAM — Pray God it's rice. The other can wait until we've actually ingested something.

With a magician's flourish, AKHMATOVA produces an egg from her pocket and holds it before MANDELSTAM'S eyes.

Ahh...No, wait. I can't. You must keep this darling for yourself. I doubt you've eaten in days.

AKHMATOVA — I've given up the habit entirely. What filth: taking inert matter into your mouth with all your missing teeth and blackened fillings on display. Disgusting, really. I will rise above these brute necessities. Besides ...(*She turns her head slowly to the side.*) gaze upon the sculpted profile of the chicly gaunt poet.

A long pause while they look at each other in silence.

Nothing. Not a word, though I go every day to the Lubianka to ask after him and hear the keepers refuse to admit he's even there. Or that he exists or ever has. As he may not... any longer...Not a word. Nothing. One can subsist without food but without word I'm no longer sure. This leaden silence.

MANDELSTAM — At the same time, words fill my lungs like fluid. I'll drown in them if they're not released. My own words in my own

voice, not the chorus asking if Stalin will approve, will permit. Will, God forbid, attend and praise.

AKHMATOVA —

Placing two of her fingers gently over his lips.

Don't, don't, don't. Please. They musn't hear these things.

GUSEV —

From outside the room, his head lit as before.

Shut up, Bitch. Let him speak. Say it, you weakling.

AKHMATOVA — Come, Love. Eat. You need your strength. We need it.

MANDELSTAM takes the egg and sitting cracks the shell on the table, but distracted, does not peel it, rather using the egg to trace something on the tabletop as if writing, his lips moving silently.

AKHMATOVA, hand to mouth, turns and rushes from the room. He doesn't notice her departure.

