

TWO ICONIC ARTISTS - A KINSHIP OF SOULS

Ira Aldridge [1807-1867] and Taras Shevchenko [1814-1861]

■ Taras, Hryhorevych Shevchenko, the undaunted champion of justice, equality and freedom for his Ukrainian brethren and Ira, Fredrick Aldridge, the famous African American tragedian actor and interpreter of Shakespeares' signature protagonists *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Shylock* and *King Lear* met in St. Petersburg, Russia in November of 1858.

Taras Shevchenko was a regular guest of honour in the residence of Count and Countess Leonid Tolstoy, Vice President of the Russian Imperial Academy of Arts. Along with his wife, Russian and Ukrainian contemporaries they tirelessly petitioned and interceded in gaining freedom for the aged Ukrainian bard who with ruined health, returned to St. Petersburg in order to thank his friends for their agapic efforts, ending ten languishing years of a loathsome military exile at the Orenburg, Orsk and eventually Novopetrovskoe Fortress in Kazakhstan.

Since Shevchenko was banished from his native Ukraina, he welcomed Count Tolstoy's offer of a position in the Imperial Academy specializing in etching. An ardent affectionado of drama, he graciously accepted an unexpected invitation to a theatrical debut at the Mariinsky Theater.

The headliner was the talented and famous African American tragedian, Ira Aldridge. He was on tour from the famous theaters of London, England, Ireland, Austria, Belgium, Holland, Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Scandinavia and Switzerland.

The acclaimed interpreter of Shakespeare since 1852 accepted an invitation from the Russian Imperial Theatre to perform and tour Russia in his signature roles before the aristocracy, social glitterati and artistic circles of St. Petersburg.

Shevchenko, his friends and patrons of the arts anticipated the evening debut of *Othello* in a filled to capacity theater. The play was unique and unprecedented in style. Shevchenko, reduced to tears stood in awe of the magnificent performance. In Shevchenko's memoirs Taras stated: "He [Aldridge] does wonders on the stage."

Aldridge neither knew the patrons in the audience nor the powerful effect he would have on them. In fact, following Ira's superb staging through gestures and mimicry, the bilingual English-German performance in St. Petersburg was an ovational success. He was invited and cordially feted at the Tolstoy residence. There, he met and mingled with forward thinking artists and intellectuals. Among them was Taras Shevchenko.

Instantaneously, both men forged a solid friendship based on their natural creative, cultural and spiritual kinship of souls. Extensive lively conversations filled with gestures, mime, joy and sorrow flourished—all simultaneously translated into either English or Russian by Tolstoy's daughters. (*Yunge, Recollections, 1913*)

As independent artists, these men severed the language barrier while bonding in the proximity and substance of shared commonalities. These were:

1) **Mutual respect for their artistic talent and the impact they had upon the consciousness** of their respective people. Neither allowed himself to be dragged down from humanism—from the optimistic view of humankind. They used their talent as weapons for a positive purpose.

2) **The love of Shakespeare.** European authors, their literature and poetry. Shevchenko—well-read in William Shakespeare [translations in Russian and Polish] understood the plots, conflicts, sad fate and major themes in Shakespearean plays.

"Про те, як поет цікавився, любив і знав Шекспіра, свідчать його висловлювання, листи, в яких Шевченко неодноразово звертався до своїх друзів з проською надіслати твори Шекспіра. У своєму «Перегляді українських книжок» (журнал «Основа», 1862 р.) П. Куліш підкреслює: «Пушкіна він звав напам'ять, а Шекспіра возив із собою, куди б не їхав». В листі до М. Костомарова (1 лютого 1847 р.) Шевченко просить: «Та ще ось що, пошліть Хому до мого товариша, нехай він візьме у його портфель, ящик або скриньку з красками і Шекспіра...». З Орської фортеці він звертається до О. Лізоуба:" *"

This love of drama propelled Taras to attend most of the tragedians' performances where he reveled in how "he [Ira] shows us the living Shakespeare."

3) **The understanding of noble concepts** of artistic beauty, truth, justice, individual freedom and dignity. Within this context both men empathized the commonalities in a) their sad childhood (loss of mothers at age 9), b) gloomy oppression of serfdom under Russia in Eastern Ukraine and under Austria/Poland in Western Ukraine, paralleling the dehumanizing slavery/segregation/discrimination in America. Taras Shevchenko was born a serf while Ira was descended from a freed slave, c) They connected with the central uncompromising struggle and dull pain of the human condition. It provoked their talents to protest against the abuses of kinfolk, and the the arbitrariness of authority. Their artistry demanded recognition of the principles of human rights and dignity. In his *My Last Will*, Shevchenko called for the "breaking of chains." (s.5), a powerful symbol of liberation to all mankind.

4) **The mutual experience** of political, cultural and spiritual wounding of the human soul that could be assuaged with liberty and self-actualization.

5) **Pushing political and social boundaries** in restricted societies where segregation and discrimination were based upon race, ethnicity, social status and/or political beliefs.



6) **Themes current in the 19th century:** 1) *Abolition of slavery* in America, *Abolition of serfdom* in Ukraine, both oppressive systems of control; 2) *Human rights and dignity* of man; 3) *Exile and separation* from family and homeland—Ira left America—a personal "exile" to seek a career in Europe which accepted him as a successful actor, not a man of color. Taras was exiled from his homeland and incarcerated by tsarist decree because of his persona, his powerful influence using Ukrainian vernacular and the motivational call to liberty which in itself was an unacceptable concept and a political threat to the oppressors of Ukrainian serfs.

7) **Love of music, dance and songs** which captivated and expressed what could not be articulated with words. Both men developed a comprehensive knowledge of their respective cultures. It bonded their brief and intense friendship. Many guests at the Tolstoy residence participated in the multi lingual evenings of song, recitation and merriment. One can assume, that with Ira, "the artist" referring to Taras acquired several words of English, as Ira did in Ukrainian.

8) **Ira's medium** was the power of words which were forcefully recited in theatrical roles through protagonists who endured multiple conflicts and even catastrophic death. **Taras' media** were pencil with paper—the written words [lyrical and symbolic tragedies, patriotic/motivational poetry], brush, paint and canvas-art.

9) **Admiration of like minds.** Taras Shevchenko offered to sketch a portrait of Ira as token of friendship. It was drawn in black/white Italian pencil, completed on December 25, 1858, signed by both men and gifted to Ekaterina, Tolstoy's daughter who served as a translator for both men. Ira Aldridge accepted artist Mikeshyn's portrait of Taras before departing St. Petersburg for London, England. He also promised to visit Ukraine and introduce the Shakespearean repertoire. Unfortunately, Taras could not promise to visit Ira's America or Europe. His ill health, finances and political circumstances restricted his mobility.

10) **Both were trailblazers.** Ira role modelled to his peers, that perseverance can open doors to success. As a nationalist, Taras Shevchenko's ideals of universal humanism were emulated by other international authors. Charles Dickens Jr. (*All the Year Round, May 5, 1877*) found inspiration in his poems. "Some of Taras's saddest poems...would apply almost word for word to our land."

Taras Shevchenko did not live to see Ira tour Ukraine. He died at 47 and was