# Financial Mechanisms to Foster Cultural Dialogue (by example of *The Light That Shines in the Darkness*, an IBPP-Culture Project Implemented Jointly by the Yasnaya Polyana Museum Estate and the Stiftung Schloss Neuhardenberg Foundation, Germany)

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*The Light That Shines in the Darkness*, a theatrical performance based on L.N. Tolstoy’s eponymous play, premiered in Russia at the Yasnaya Polyana Museum Estate on September 9, 2009. The production was staged by Volker Schlőndorff, a Germany director who has already earned the reputation of a classic, winning both the Oscar and the Palme d’Or.

This production became the “core” of a grand international project whose partners included the Yasnaya Polyana Museum Estate, a State Memorial and Nature Reserve, and the German Schloss Neuhardenberg GmbH Foundation. The partnership idea was born several years ago, with the initiative coming from the Russian party: the Yasnaya Polyana Museum Estate’s similarity to Neuhardenberg became apparent to Yasnaya Polyana Museum Estate Director Vladimir Tolstoy during his research into the work of – and potential collaboration with – German cultural organisations. The main principle of their operations involves an unbending abidance to the legacy of the great names of history whose heritage was put in their trust, with this legacy’s subsequent promotion and dissemination. And if Yasnaya Polyana is inextricably intertwined with the name of Leo Tolstoy, then the Stiftung Schloss Neuhardenberg Foundation is beholden to the pro-Russian chancellor, Prince Karl August von Hardenberg – a statesman who initiated the profound humane conversion of Germany at one of the most critical points in that nation’s history. The culturally-rich lives of both memorial associations are based on the principle of attracting a vast quantity of visitors. Both Yasnaya Polyana and Neuhardenberg are fairly far removed from Moscow and Berlin (relative to their countries’ respective sizes). However, a considerable percentage of the people who arrive here are residents of the two capitals. When it first started this project, the Tolstoy Museum Estate already had experience in staging mass theatrical events. But unlike its German partner, it lacked the status of a theatrical events organiser**.**

**A long-term cooperation agreement was signed between the Yasnaya Polyana Museum Estate and the** Schloss Neuhardenberg Foundation in Dresden in October 2006 within the frameworks of the **Russo-German** Saint Petersburg Dialogue Forum. Yasnaya Polyana Museum Director Vladimir Tolstoy and the Foundation’s General Representative Bernd Kaufmann agreed that this partnership should focus on raising awareness among the German and Russian general public about what each of the organisations was doing to in the process of their dedicated work to a variety of cultural projects. Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy’s legacy – both literary and philosophical – has always been of tremendous interest to the Schloss Neuhardenberg Foundation. From the very start of this collaboration, there was already talk of both Germany and Russia commemorating the 100-year anniversary of Lev Nikolayevich’s death in 2010. And it was decided that the 180-year anniversary of the author’s birth should coincide their joint production of one of his plays. The German party’s choice fell on one of Tolstoy’s latest and most autobiographical works – *The Light That Shines in the Darkness*, which is largely interpreted as the author’s religious, literate and ideological testament. The play has appeared in Russian theater and cinema, but not as frequently as some of Lev Nikolayevich’s other more famous works. Neuhardenberg Museum partner’s decision was explained by the fact that the questions raised by this work a century ago remain unanswered to this day – and that people cannot but understand this.

From its very start, the production’s idea contained something far greater than a simple exchange of experience between the two organisations. It was planned that this joint venture should help create a stable platform for German-Russian cultural dialogue, also consolidating Yasnaya Polyana’s standing as an international cultural center. This project could further provide an example of successful international collaboration for many other organisations, thus “giving a nudge” to other similar initiatives. But this idea’s actual implementation unquestionably required outside support – at the state and international levels. The most optimal solution for both partners involved their participation in the European Union program in support of cultural initiatives. Their grant application was submitted to the European Commission Representative Office in Russia in July 2007. And just a few months later, their European Commission colleagues were able to congratulate Yasnaya Polyana and Neuhardenberg with the successful start of a new project whose total budget reached 600,000 euros. A not-insubstantial success was also marked by the partners’ ability to attract a renowned director to the project – *The Light That Shines in the Darkness* was picked up by Volker Schlőndorff, a maestro of the cinema arts who holds both an Oscar and a Palme d’Or. He approached the theatrical production with tremendous enthusiasm and was thrilled with the idea of staging an open-air performance – something that Schloss Neuhardenberg Foundation representatives have particularly excelled in before. The negotiations with Schlondorff were led by the Foundation’s management, who had previously set the condition that the production must involve the participation of a European star whose name could ensure the project’s additional success.

Many of the serious undertakings are often subjected to the test of time. *The Light That Shines in the Darkness* was no exception. The production’s premiere was initially due to be held on the day of L.N. Tolstoy’s 180-year anniversary – September 9, 2008. But a Hollywood project that appeared on the director’s schedule at the same time as the Russian play forced the project’s participants to take a pause and involve themselves in staging the production’s accompanying events. Two major seminars were planned by the partner organisations as part of their exchange of experience – one on Tolstoy’s religious philosophy, and the one devoted to cultural management. It was decided to hold the production’s premiere a year later, with the official Russian release being preceded by a series of premiere performances in Neuhardenberg.

According to the concept of the project, the entire production should have been “made” in German, only then “coming” to Yasnaya Polyana. Work on the original script based on the play was begun by playwright Gerhard Ahrens in 2008, with designer Mark Lammert being selected as the production’s stage designer. The role of selecting Yasnaya Polyana as the theatrical venue for play was successfully performed by the director himself, who flew to Russia in November 2008 to learn about Leo Tolstoy’s estate. And only a few days after his visit, Neuhardenberg hosted a conference entitled “Glimmers in the Darkness: Tolstoy – Utopia and Reality of the World,” which provided the philosophical prolog to the production. The conference was attended by the L.N. Tolstoy Museum Estate Director Vladimir Tolstoy, the play’s director and stage manager, Volker Schlőndorff, the writers, Andrei Bitov and Vladimir Sorokin, philosopher Mikhail Ryklin, the historian, Jutta Scherrer, theologian Friedrich Schorlemmer, publicist Irina Shcherbakova, and Rosemarie Tietze, a translator of Tolstoy works. The event was moderated by the German journalist Lerke von Saalfeld. The writers and scientists, translator and theologian, film director and Leo Tolstoy’s great-great-grandson who heads the museum all told the conference about “their” Tolstoy and discussed the great author’s phenomenon.

The first working meeting devoted to a discussion of the project’s technical details was held in Neuhardenberg in November 2008. The Russian project team was presented with a technical rider of the production, as well as sketches of the decorations and the stage. The two key roles – the play’s two main characters, who were essentially the prototypes of Lev Nikolayevich and Sofia Andreyevna Tolstoy – were without reservation handed to the “stars” of German theater and cinema – Hans-Michael Reberg, who played in the world-renowned Schindler’s List, and Angela Winkler, Schlőndorff’s muse who played in several of his films.

A fairly major complication standing in the way of an event as large-scale and large-budget as an international theatrical production was provided by the global financial crisis, which had already put many major cultural projects to rest. The “Culture and Crisis” seminar, which was held at the L.N. Tolstoy Museum Estate in March 2009, was thus not only relevant to this particular stretch of time, but was also of tremendous practical importance to the impending staging of *The Light That Shines in the Darkness* project. The seminar’s working group included Yasnaya Polyana Museum staff members who were directly responsible for the project, as well as their colleagues from the Kulikovo Polye, Spasskoye-Lutovinovo and Melikhovo Museums and Nature Reserves. The roles of experts were played by representatives of the Schloss Neuhardenberg Foundation and their Moscow colleagues – Professor Yevgeny Dukov, and Cultural Policy Institute Director Mikhail Gnedovsky. The seminar’s objective focused on developing strategies for moving the project ahead and determining both its target audience and precise working budget. It was at this stage that the Yasnaya Polyana project team had to be expanded – the production’s executive producer and two administrators received additional support from Moscow specialists responsible for technical preparations, media communications, PR and ticket distribution.

Although information about the project did periodically appear in the press and was further available at the Schloss Neuhardenberg Foundation and Yasnaya Polyana Museum Estate’s official websites, the first major presentation of the upcoming production was held exactly three months before its Russian premiere – June 9, 2009. It was on this day that the European Commission Head of Mission to Russia Mark Franco opened his residence to a press conference in which the project’s main participants shared their views about their work: these included the heads of both partner organisations, Vladimir Tolstoy and Bernd Kaufmann, director Volker Schlőndorff, and representatives of organisations who provided their utmost support for the project. The grantor – the European Commission – was represented at the press conference by Ambassador Mark Franco, while the project’s transportation sponsor – the Volkswagen Group Rus company – was represented by its PR Manager Andrei Gordasevich.

Somewhat in advance of this event came the launch of the www.lew-tolstoi.eu website, which was developed especially for covering the preparations for the production. The website officially started selling tickets in the summer of 2009 – first for the play’s German, and then its Russian premiers. The promo campaign designed to draw in the Moscow audience was unfurled through both the Internet and the media, with considerable support provided by the event’s information sponsors: the RIA Novosti news agency, Radio Kultura (Culture), Radio Russia, Radio Holding One, the Afisha magazine, and the magazines Everyday Psychology (Psikhologiya na Kazhdy Den), Cult Trek (Kultpokhod), and Your Leisure Time (Vash Dosug). Strict and laconic in its design, the play’s outdoor advertising appeared on the streets of Tula a month before its Yasnaya Polyana premiere. By September 9, the question of whether a fairly uninitiated audience was willing to sit through a two-hour performance of not one of the world’s most dynamic plays, and one which was further staged in subtitles from German, was settled: tickets for the three performances were almost completely sold out. It is quite likely that the Moscow public was further attracted by the fact that the ticket price included a transfer pass between Moscow and Yasnaya Polya and back. And there is little question that enormous additional work was also provided by the event’s transportation sponsor – the Volkswagen Group Rus company – on the day of the premiere: the number of invitees required the mobilisation of an entire fleet of cars.

September 9, 2009 marked the culmination of a nearly two-year period of preparations for the key event – the theatrical production of *The Light That Shines in the Darkness*. Three weeks prior to this, Neuhardenberg hosted a series of sold-out premiere performances of the play. In early September, the production was literally moved to Yasnaya Polyana: the estate received all of the stage designs, decorations, costumes, accessories and, of course, the actors themselves. Two rehearsals were held on the eve of the performance, with the second simultaneously being the premiere’s official dress rehearsal and presentation to the media – according to an agreement with the German partners, all photographs and video footage of the play could only be taken on this day.

Unlike the September 10, 11 and 12 performances, for which tickets were sold in both Tula and Moscow, the September 9 premier could be attended by invitation only. The Yasnaya Polyana premiere was attended by a staff delegation from European Commission Representative Office in Russia, which was led by acting Office Head Paul Vandoren, as well as representatives of European Union member-state embassies in Russia and staff members of the Volkswagen Group Rus company. A press conference was held two hours before the Yasnaya Polyana premier. It was attended by the play’s director and stage manager Volker Schlőndorff, stage designer Mark Lammert, Yasnaya Polyana Museum Estate Director Vladimir Tolstoy, the Schloss Neuhardenberg Foundation’s General Representative Bernd Kaufmann, acting Head of the European Commission Representative Office in Russia Paul Vandoren, Russian Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany Walter Jűrgen Schmid, The Kingdom of Sweden Ambassador to Russia, Tomas Bertelman, and official Volkswagen representative Martin Jahn. Both foreign and Russian media representatives were accredited to the press conference; in addition, several exclusive interviews with the play’s director were recorded on September 8-9.

Summarizing the impressions of the four premiere presentations at Tolstoy’s estate, one can unequivocally call the project an emphatic success for both those responsible for staging the play and its initiators. The production was distinguished by the fact that it was staged directly inside the estate itself, against the backdrop of the Yasnaya Polyana gardens and park, which played the role of natural decorations. The “home” atmosphere of a Russian nobility manor – where, strictly speaking, *The Light That Shines in the Darkness* was actually written – beyond all question also inspired the actors themselves. The public was in no way impeded in its appreciation for the play by either its language barrier or the need to constantly follow the subtitles. Each evening, not only all of the 400 available general audience seats, but also the additional seating made available for special invitees and museum staff, were all filled. The production’s success was even helped by the weather – not a single drop of rain fell through the entire first half of September. Otherwise, the productions would have been under threat: neither the stage nor the rows of seating were protected by an awning, and if it had rained, those who came with blankets and raincoats would have been much better off than the actors themselves.

The job of creating the theatrical venue’s foundation and audience hall, as well as the assignment of suitably “fitting” these fairly large stage designs in the estate, fell on the Yoshka-Ola firm LightCD-PRO, which won a tender for providing the Russian production’s technical support. The metal-frame, plastic-seat audience stand was set up on the grounds of a small former tennis lawn that rests between two of Yasnaya Polyana’s parks. At the very top sat the sound and light directors, whose working stations were outfitted with all of the necessary equipment. The stage, which came directly from Germany, was placed several meters from the front audience row. Together with the original revolving decorations, it was installed by a joint technical team composed of German, Moscow and Yoshkar-Ola specialists. The stage’s vertical cover facing the audience held up an LED display that provided synchronous Russian subtitles to the German text being read by the actors on stage. Although in truth, the synchronous display of subtitles depended not only on the technology, but also – and to an even greater extent – on a translator who came to Yasnaya Polyana and became a kind of conduit between the European art and the Russian audience body. The translator became a full-fledged participant of the play. The display’s location allowed the audience to see the subtitles from any seat in the hall – but observing the audience, one could tell that they the actual words of the play and the actors’ emotions were just as important to them.

A bilingual playbill was specially printed for the German premier. It included information about the project, the history of the play’s production, biographical materials and excerpts from Lev Nikolayevich and Sofia Andreyevna Tolstoy’s diaries. A part of the playbill’s print run was brought to Yasnaya Polyana and included in the assortment of materials issued for September 9, and made available for sale before each performance. The original text of *The Light That Shines in the Darkness* was published in a separate brochure for the Russian-speaking audience. The foreign audience, meanwhile, was provided with Aymler Maude’s English translation of the script.

The musical accompaniment to the production primarily involved live instruments: one of the play’s roles was played by the multiple instrument musician, Jan Tilman Schade, who primarily remained off-stage. The voices of his cello, accordion and electric piano intertwined with the sounds of the estate and felt completely natural amid the Yasnaya Polyana scenery. The lighting solution was just as natural, laconic and simple: each of the plays began under daylight, which was gradually replaced by the colors of the fading day, eventually ending in near darkness. Natural lighting shining through the darkness was provided by stage spotlights that flared up in the final scene, before suddenly dimming and ceding their place to the weak flames of oil lamps, which were set up across the edges of the main alley of the estate.

The press reaction to the play was quite varied: almost all of the publications and television stations underscored the event’s unquestionable importance to Russian culture as a whole and to the Yasnaya Polyana Museum in particular. They also stressed the modern-day relevance of the issues raised by the play. A separation of people into the rich and the poor, deficiencies of conscience and morality, the problem of responsibility for what is happening around you – all of these are still the main problems facing our own civilization. It is no accident that many of the comments and reviews repeated the phrase “it is shameful to be rich,” a leitmotif of Leo Tolstoy’s “ideological testament.”

As of today, the events portion of *The Light That Shines in the Darkness* project is practically over; all that remains for the project team is to analyze their work and prepare a report for the European Commission. *The Light That Shines in the Darkness* became the third Tolstoy Museum project to receive European Union support. But it was the first to be conducted within the frameworks of a cultural initiatives development program. Over the two years of the project’s implementation, the Yasnaya Polyana Museum Estate and the Schloss Neuhardenberg Foundation were able to establish strong partner relations, fostering a productive cultural dialogue that should help strengthen the ties between Russia and Germany. This initiative had a positive effect on Yasnaya Polyana’s development as an international cultural center, with its successful implementation attesting to the museum estate’s readiness to participate in similar major projects like these in the future.