

IN MEMORIAM

Karl D. Kramer, 1934-2014

A specialist on Chekhov who shared with his subject a great feel for irony and a very wry sense humor, Karl also had that which, according to Chekhov, was *sine qua non* for a successful and interesting life — talent. He had talent as a scholar, talent as a teacher, talent as a leader, and talent as a friend. His colleagues, his former students and all who knew him are truly mourning his loss.

Karl was a true Northwesterner. Born and raised in Seattle, Karl earned all his degrees — B.A. (English, 1955), M.A. (Comparative Literature, 1957), and Ph.D. (Comparative Literature, 1964) — at the University of Washington. As a participant in one of the first Cold War academic exchanges in the Soviet Union, Karl attended Moscow State University as a doctoral candidate in 1959-1960. He left Seattle for his initial academic appointments at Northwestern (1961-1975) and later the University of Michigan (1965-1970), where he received tenure. But by 1970 he was back at the University of Washington, where he would teach jointly in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures and the Department of Comparative Literature until his retirement in 1999. For ten years — 1988-1998 — Karl chaired the Slavic Department. Some of these were tumultuous years, as when the Slavic Department, quite inexplicably, was slated for elimination in 1994. Under his quiet but very shrewd and competent leadership, the department fought for close to two years and finally emerged victorious, having retained all its faculty and all its degree programs.

Karl's scholarship on Chekhov made him one of the most sought after authorities on the writer. His works on Chekhov included two books — *The Chameleon and the Dreams: The Image of Reality in Cexov's Stories* (1970) and *Chekhov's Major Plays* (1996) — as well as numerous articles, including some in the Norton Critical Editions. From 1979 to 1981 he served on the Editorial Board of *The Slavic Review*.

Equally as important was Karl's public scholarship. He started serving as a consultant on staging Chekhov plays in 1977, when he helped Megs Booker, the artistic director of Seattle's Intiman Theater, in her staging of *Three Sisters*. In conjunction with this production, Karl also acted as panel leader in post-play discussion with the audience. In 1980, granting Booker's wish, he provided her and the Intiman cast with a new translation of *The Cherry Orchard*, which was staged in 1980. A third Chekhov play, *The Seagull*, again with Karl's active participation, was staged in 1983. After Booker left two years later, Karl continued to work with artistic directors at Intiman as well as ACT (A Contemporary Theater) in Seattle whenever they staged Chekhov. He also flew to Connecticut, where Booker was now artistic director at the Hartman Theater in Stamford, whenever she staged Chekhov there. His familiarity with putting on Chekhov's plays led him to frequently admonish his students to remember that a play is not meant to be read but to be staged. He often described staging a play as "somewhat analogous to solving a

Sudoku,” which was, in fact , one of his hobbies: “The author gives us a certain amount of information and from that the actors are expected to interpolate the rest.”

Karl also brought Chekhov’s plays to less traditional audiences. In the late 1980s and through the 1990s he was instrumental in organizing an outreach program, “Chekhov Seen and Unseen,” which was funded by the Washington State Commission for the Humanities. It featured him, a director and two actors who traveled across the state, in settings ranging from community colleges to prisons, presenting scenes and discussions of Chekhov. Those who participated with him in this project could not say enough about his “splendid work,” the “keen interest” he took in the rehearsals of the scenes, and his overall support of directors and actors which “added much of the fun and growth” to them all.

Karl’s other talent was indeed teaching. He related exceedingly well to students not only because he was so knowledgeable but also because he refused to take himself too seriously. In an interview with his former student and close friend, Professor Ron LeBlanc (University of New Hampshire), he reminisced in 2011 for the UW Slavic Newsletter about “a rather large undergraduate course” he taught in early years, “when he was — in his words — ‘ranting on’ about some supposedly major issue in Tolstoy”: “He was about to say something that he obviously considered of enormous importance, when he looked out at the students: all he could see in front of him were pencils and pens poised to catch the Delphic oracle’s overwhelmingly significant comment, and he started giggling.”

Karl died on February 19, 2014, and former students offered poignant tributes to him. “It was an exceptional academic adventure,” wrote one, “to immerse myself in Chekhov for an entire semester and to participate in Karl’s seminar and absorb his thoughts about our current readings. He was a wonderful, kind, wise, droll human being and teacher.” “I will never forget,” wrote another, “how he opened my mind to Anna Karenina. I learned to love Anna Karenina through his excellent guidance.” Still another offered a perfect vignette of Karl in a classroom in the late 1980s: “I can see Professor Kramer as clear as day, delivering one of his many illuminating and amusing lectures on Russian Lit. (Chekhov lectures being my favorite). In a Thompson Hall classroom, he’d sit on one of those tables at the head of class, his arms at his side, and after posing a probing question, with a subtle smile he’d wait quietly, slightly swinging his legs (which for a man of his stature were at least 4 inches off the floor) until someone could offer insight. Forever gentle, may his sweet soul rest in peace.”

Karl’s wife Doreen, his partner since his student years, survived Karl by just ten days. They left behind a daughter, Jennifer, her husband, Jim, and two grandsons.

A Memorial Service for Karl was held at the University of Washington Club on April 5, 2014.

Galya Diment/University of Washington, Seattle/April 2014