

DENIS IVANOVICH FONVIZIN

Johanna Granville

Copyright: Johanna Granville, "Fonvizin, Denis Ivanovich" in *The Encyclopedia of Russian History*, edited by James R. Millar. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004 (pp. 511-512).

Fonvizin, Denis Ivanovitch (1744-1792), the first truly original Russian dramatist in the eighteenth century, is best known for two satirical plays written in prose: **The Brigadier-General** (*Brigadir*) and **The Minor** (*Nedorosl'*). *Brigadir*, written in 1766, was not published until 1786. *Nedorosl'* was first staged in 1783 and published the following year. Both are considered masterpieces combining Russian and French comedy.

Like all writers at the time, Fonvizin was born into a well-to-do family. His father, a strict disciplinarian, trained him to become a real "gentleman," and became the model for one of the characters – the father of Mr. Oldwise (*Starodum*)- in Fonvizin's play **The Minor**. Although thoroughly Russianized, the family's ancestor was a German or Swedish prisoner captured in the Livonian campaigns of Ivan the Terrible. At Moscow University Fonvizin participated actively in theatrical productions. Upon graduation in 1762 (when Catherine II became empress), Fonvizin entered the civil service. In St. Petersburg, he befriended Ivan Dmitrevsky, a prominent actor, and began to translate and adapt foreign plays for him. He wrote minor works, such as *Alzire, or the Americans* (1762) and *Korion* (1764), but tasted

his first real success when Catherine summoned him to the Hermitage to read his comedy The Brigadier to her. In 1769 she then appointed him secretary to Vice-Chancellor Nikita Panin, Catherine's top diplomatic advisor.

Although faithful to the French genre in writing The Brigadier, Fonvizin was less inspired by Molière than by the Danish playwright Barin Ludvig Holberg, from whose play *Jean de France* Fonvizin's play was derived. A salon comedy, The Brigadier attacks the nobility's corruption and ignorance. After reading the play, Panin wrote to Fonvizin: "I see that you know our customs well, because the wife of your general is completely familiar to us. No one among us can deny having a grandmother or an aunt of the sort. You have written our first comedy of manners." The play also mocks the Russian gentry's "gallomania"; without French rules for behavior "we wouldn't know how to dance, how to enter a room, how to bow, how to perfume ourselves, how to put a hat on, and, when excited, how to express our passions and the state of our heart."

In 1782, Fonvizin finished The Minor. Since it was unthinkable that these lines could be read aloud to Catherine, he arranged a performance at Kniper's Theater in St. Petersburg with Dmitrevsky as the character, Mr. Oldwise. The audience, recognizing the play as original and uniquely Russian, signaled its appreciation by flinging purses onto the stage. The play condemns domestic tyranny and false education, while touching also on larger social questions, such as serfdom. The play concerns the stupid son in a noble family, the Prostakovs (a play on the word *prostoi* or "simple"), who refuses to study properly but still expects to receive privileges. The lad's name – Mitrofan (or Mitrofanushka in the diminutive) – is now a

synonym in Russia for a dolt or fool. The composition of the family is telling. The mother, a bully, is obsessed with her son (that he get enough to eat and marry an heiress). Her brother resembles a pig more than a man (as his name, *Skotina*, suggests). Her husband acts sheepishly; the nurse spoils the boy; and the boy - wildly selfish and stupid - beats her. The play's basic action revolves around the conflict between the Prostakovs on the one hand and Starodum and his associates on the other. The formers' "coarse bestiality" (as Gogol termed it) contrasts sharply with the lofty morality that Starodum and his friends exhibit.

In 1782, Fonvizin's boss, Count Panin, had a stroke and summoned Fonvizin to write his Political Testament. He instructed the dramatist to deliver the testament, containing a blunt denunciation of absolute power, to Catherine after Panin's death. However, when Panin died the next year, Catherine impounded all his papers (not to be released from archives until 1905) and dismissed Fonvizin. Pushkin later wrote that Catherine probably feared him. The playwright's health declined after a seizure in 1785 and he died in 1791.

Bibliography

Fonvizin, Denis Ivanovich and Walter J. Gleason. *The Political and Legal Writings of Denis Fonvizin* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis Publishers, 1985).

Levitt, Marcus C. *Early Modern Russian Writers, Late Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1995).

Moser, Charles A. *Denis Fonvizin* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979).

Pavlenkov, F., S.M. Brilliant, et al. *Fonvizin; Krylov; Kol'tsov; Shevchenko; Nikitin: Biograficheskie Povestvovaniia--Sostavlenie, Obshchaia Redaktsiia i Posleslovie N. F. Boldyreva* (Cheliabinsk, Russia: "Ural Ltd.," 1998).

Raeff, Marc., ed. *Russian Intellectual History: an Anthology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World 1966).