



UNSSSEESING
THE
ALUMNI
MAGAZINE
FROM SSEES
FEATURING
...FIELDWORK,
FEEDBACK,
THEATRE
AND FOOD!

SIXTH EDITION | AUTUMN 2013

Editorial – In Good Faith



Welcome to the sixth edition of *UnSSEESing*.

This edition focusses on two areas: reports from some of the recipients of funds donated by alumni, and the expanding activities of the Association and its future plans.

When I attended graduation last year, I discovered that almost none of the new SSEES alumni had any idea there was a SSEES Alumni Association. In an attempt to rectify the situation, in March Peter Seagrave (1961–65) and I regaled an audience of soon-to-graduate students with anecdotes and amazing facts about student life at SSEES in the early 1960s. I think we managed to make them laugh, at least enough to decide to repeat the exercise next year. We'll also be sending a team to graduation, and hope that as a result of our efforts a larger proportion of recent graduates will keep in touch.

Faith Wigzell

UNSSSEESING



Alumni Association activities – Paulina and Kathryn

As activities in the Alumni Association expand, recruiting people willing to become involved has become essential. In particular young blood is what we have needed most. At the alumni event last October Paulina Polak kindly volunteered to join the organising group. This is what she has to say about herself, SSEES and the Association:

Walking into the October SSEES Alumni event, I was greeted by a large picture of a toilet. Of course, I instantly questioned its relevance to a networking event, but within minutes my mind was captivated by an insightful, humorous and memorable presentation by Professor Wendy Bracewell, which truthfully, couldn't be any further from my day job.

I graduated in EBEES (Economics, Business and East European Studies) in 2006. Since then I have often relied on the knowledge and contacts acquired during my degree. However, nothing shaped my career choice as much as a superb class on Russian political economy that led me to the social entrepreneurship scene and a one-year long leadership programme called 'On Purpose'.

To make the most of our prestigious *alma mater*, and to carry on growing as individuals we need to recognize that the benefits of networking arise from our differences rather than similarities. A lecture on sanitary units perhaps won't change my career path, but it surely expanded my horizons and led to light-hearted conversations with a diverse group of fellow alumni.

The strength of the SSEES Alumni Association comes from its unique geographical, cultural and language coverage and its age composition. It is a network of people with incredible potential, so I am thrilled to be involved at this crucial stage of its growth and look forward to cultivating and nurturing it with you.



It is great to have the help of someone absorbed in a dynamic career, and we are equally pleased to have enrolled one of the 2013 cohort, Kathryn Larin, who has this to say:

With a Russian father, a Bulgarian mother, yet a predominantly English upbringing, I fall into a distinct category of people who have a love-hate relationship with the question: 'Where are you from?' It is testament to the high standard of both education and social opportunity that SSEES has provided over the past four years that I have no qualms in answering that question with the answer: 'London'.

Although my career looks to be heading in the direction of investment banking, the areas in which I will be working will allow me to use the substantial knowledge I acquired during my EBEES course and put it to practical use.

SSEES has provided me with a launch pad into a fast-paced, exciting career, and it is my pleasure to give back to the university that has given me so much and on which I can build.

Image bottom left: Paulina Polak

Image bottom right: Kathryn outside St Isaac's Cathedral, Petersburg



Alumni Event – Tickle your taste buds and mark your diary!



In a departure from our usual format of events, the next alumni occasion will be an **East European food and drink evening**. To be held on **October 24th**, the plan is to present food and drink from many of the countries that SSEES covers. At the time of writing (early August), precise details are not available, but we will be sending more information by email in September.

Alumni Event 21st March – Phil Cavendish decodes *Russian Ark*

Irena Maryniak went along and sent us this report:

The Preservation of High Culture is a daunting theme, and when I first saw Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* soon after its release in 2002, I was less gobsmacked than perplexed. So it was reassuring to hear Phil Cavendish demystify this grandiose and heavily coded film.

Technically it's an amazing stunt, with over 90 minutes of uncut video recorded in the Winter Palace and a cast of over 2000. In this meandering, dreamlike vision, the camera becomes the eye of an invisible, ghostly narrator, whose voice (Sokurov's) is heard throughout the film, seeking a role that stays elusive to the end.

The action ripples loosely over nearly three centuries, with impassioned exchanges about Rembrandt, van Dyck or El Greco, and intimate windows on an iconic, mythologised historical past: Peter the Great assaults a general; Catherine the Great directs a play; Nicholas and Alexandra breakfast with the family; a starving man builds coffins during the Siege of Leningrad.

There is no chronological plot, just a flow of spectacular images and snatches of dialogue between Sokurov's disembodied voice and a slightly unruly character, referred to as 'Man in Black' or 'the European', who acts as the narrator's link with the world of the senses, engaging with other characters, passing observations on the paintings, the history and the country.

Sokurov's European is modelled, Phil Cavendish revealed, on the Marquis de Custine, a French aristocrat who travelled to Russia in the late 1830s and subsequently published a travelogue that dismissed Russian culture as a superficial veneer shrouding brutality and barbarism. In the film, Custine emerges as a bossy figure with an obsessive fascination for intense Russian women. In ways that are variously playful and sinister, he interacts with the surrounding space and the characters it conjures, when the narrator cannot.

The finale has the entire cast – Custine excepted – departing down the Jordan staircase after the 1913 Imperial Ball into what appears to be an exterior of endless steaming waters. The European (agent of political reaction? *Time Lord*?) has declared meanwhile that, rather than move into the unknown, he will remain splendidly isolated inside the Russian

Ark. Whither high culture? This question, and other less elevated topics, made for lively discussion over a right royal spread at the party that followed this very stimulating talk.

An expanded version of Irena's discussion of 'Russian Ark' can be found on the alumni webpage <http://www.ssees.ucl.ac.uk/alumni/index.htm>



Alumni Association activities –

Alumni outing to ‘Children of the Sun’ at the National Theatre, May 2013

Natalia Gorstecka writes:

It was a mistake to go to Gorky’s ‘Children of the Sun’ at the National Theatre when **really** tired, and I mean really tired. Not that the play would have put anyone to sleep, even an exhausted corporate ‘slave’... Quite the opposite, it was damn good and I wish I had had more energy to follow the intricacies of the entertaining squabbles amongst the members of a privileged middle-class Russian family in the years before 1917. ‘Children of the Sun’ wittily ridicules the intelligentsia of the time engrossed in their often petty private dramas and endeavours. But behind the humour there lurks a darker picture. The misery, poverty and sickness of ordinary folk contrast starkly with the family’s obliviousness to the world outside.

Yet, what I found most striking was an irresistible sense of the play’s timelessness. Despite the years that have lapsed since this tragi-comedy was written, the world remains pervasively divided. And the parallels do not end here; caught up in our most immediate worries we often remain conveniently ignorant of the world’s ills. But beside the bitter-sweet message of the play, the production offered a spectacular visual treat with a formidable and intriguingly complex staging, which Michael Billington of *The Guardian* compared to ‘a miniature fortress’, and an unexpected and quite literally explosive finale that left spectators wowed. I must confess that, despite my tired brain, I enjoyed ‘Children of the Sun’ enormously. But above all it was wonderful to see Peter Duncan and a few other familiar faces from SSEES. This reunion, which drew twenty seven SSEES alumni and friends, brought back great memories from my time at the School. I very much look forward to participating in more SSEES social events in the future!

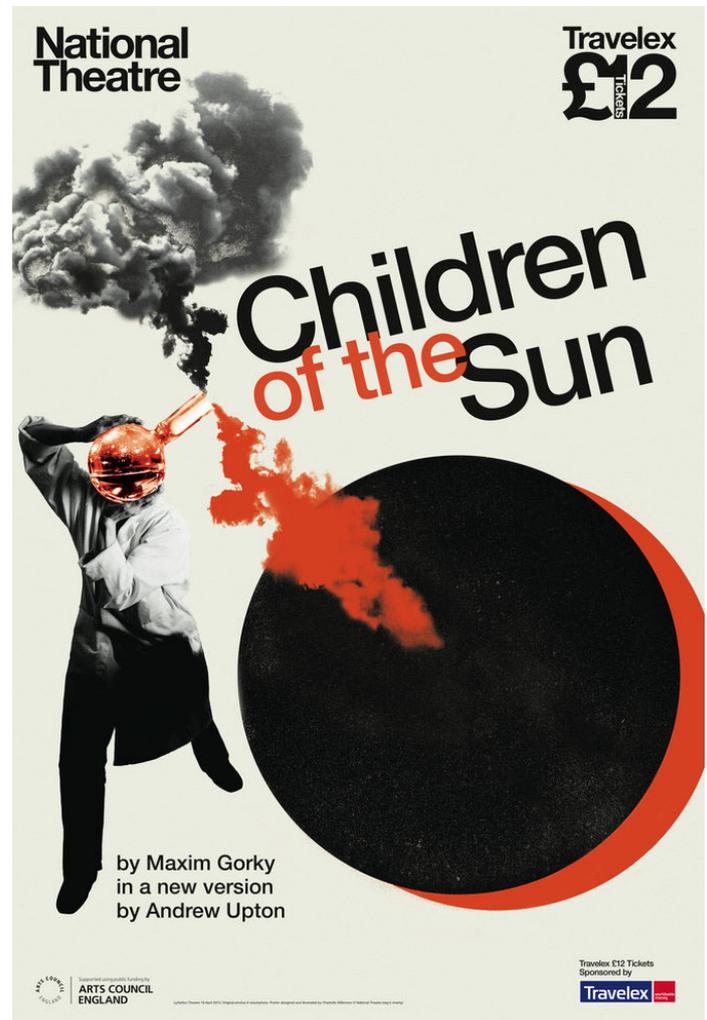


Image bottom left: Emma Lowndes as Liza, Geoffrey Streatfield as Protasov and Lucy Black as Melaniya. Photo by Richard Hubert Smith
Image above: Poster for ‘Children of the Sun’



Where does your money go? – Kristen

If you are a donor to SSEES, you may wonder where your money goes. As a matter of principle, funds are always allocated to students. This past year they have gone to students on the MRes (Master of Research) course, a relatively new kind of postgraduate degree. As the MA has increasingly been taken by those wishing to develop either specific area knowledge or a grounding in a new discipline for employment purposes, so this new degree has emerged specifically to train those intending to go on to a PhD. Part of the course involves a 20,000 word dissertation, possibly involving field work. There were several grateful recipients of grants to help with fieldwork expenses, two of whom write about their experience below – two other reports are on the alumni website.

Kristen Hartmann went to Sarajevo:

As a former architecture student, I am researching the post-war architectural reconstruction of Bosnia and Herzegovina, specifically the reconstruction of the city hall in Sarajevo – the Vijećnica (see photograph). This building is arguably one of the most important cultural heritage sites in the country. Originally designed by Habsburg architects Karl Wittek and Ciril M. Iveković in a neo-Moorish style, the Vijećnica was completed in 1894 and after the Second World War transformed into the National and University Library. Free from national affiliation, it served as an institution of common cultural life, open to all citizens regardless of ethnicity.

During the Bosnian War of the early 1990s, it became a target of sectarian violence. On the night of August 25th, 1992, five months into the four-year siege of Sarajevo, Serb nationalist forces firebombed the National Library, destroying over 1.5 million books, numerous bound manuscripts, and 100 years' worth of press archives. In 2014, twenty long years later, the Vijećnica will finally be restored to its original design and reopened to the public. It will serve government and cultural functions, including the provision of exhibition and concert space, but it will no longer house the National and University Library.

The MRes grant allowed me to travel to Sarajevo in the summer of 2012 and interview people involved in the Vijećnica's reconstruction as well as copy many of the building specifications and documents. The cultural heritage of



Bosnia and Herzegovina suffers from funding shortages and administrative confusion. In the absence of a state Ministry of Culture, the lack of resource is chronic; recently the National Museum, unable to cover operating costs, closed its doors, while staff at the National and University Library often go without pay. My research will also delve into these issues, exposing the difficulties the common cultural heritage faces in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Where does your money go? – Laurynas

As Laurynas Vaiciunas explains:

The SSEES fieldwork grant bore me 1000 kilometres east to the town of Sejny on the Polish-Lithuanian border. The little town is famous in Poland and abroad for its Borderland Foundation, which over the past twenty years has championed the philosophy of dialogue and ‘little homelands’. I was there to interview the Centre’s founder, Krzysztof Czyżewski, who, helped by a close group of enthusiasts, established the Foundation as a cultural brand in Poland and has exported its experience of building intercultural dialogue through art to places such as the post-conflict Balkans. Moreover, the Foundation has been incredibly successful at revitalising the Jewish heritage in Sejny and fusing it with native Polish and Lithuanian elements.

Located far from bustling cities, Sejny offered an abundance of what could be called ‘high culture’. At the same time this posed questions fundamental to my research. Who exactly was the intended target? Was the Foundation really engaging with and impacting on the local population? Was it too high-brow – more for a mobile urban cultural elite?

The natural setting of the Foundation was as inspiring as its rich cultural programme. I enjoyed travelling around, meeting locals and breathing the air of the region affectionately known as the green lungs of Poland. This gave me more time to reflect. The spirits that almost a hundred years ago inspired the future Nobel Prize winner Czesław Miłosz to write seemed still to be there. But the slow rhythms of the land and its people appeared vulnerable to outside influences; national and global trends were tearing the indigenous tapestry of cultures.



I was lucky that my fieldwork grant preceded an internship at the Foundation. At that time I was interested in cultural management and its relationship with art. However, my fieldwork was crucial in helping me refocus my research on the stories and histories that order people’s worldviews and the ways these affect intercultural dialogue.

Image above: Laurynas on the steps of the Centre of Borderland Cultures

Image below: Marycha, Seina or Mara – the river of many names



And finally...

Food and drink evening

The East European food and drink evening on **October 24th** promises to be a good occasion. Do come along and also encourage fellow alumni to join you.



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SSEES Centenary 2015

SSEES marks its centenary in 2015. Alumni will form a major part of the celebrations. We would love to hear your ideas for events, exhibitions, gatherings or anything else. Please do write in with them.

To contact the ssees alumni association, please email our administrator at SSEES, **Lisa Walters** on **l.walters@ucl.ac.uk**.

Please don't forget to tell the Development Office if you change your contact details.