Photo by Eileen Barroso, Columbia University.

BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

CATHARINE THEIMER NEPOMNYASHCHY *IN PROFILE*

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE'S FIRST FEMALE DIRECTOR AND 2012 ALUMNA OF THE YEAR.

Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, the first woman to become director of the Harriman Institute, is described by friends, students, and colleagues as a "sparkplug," a woman with a sense of adventure, infinite ideas, and the capacity to undertake (and accomplish) even the most outlandish-seeming endeavors. An innovative scholar who wrote the first comprehensive book on the Abram Tertz works of the Russian dissident writer Andrei Sinyavsky and edited the first-ever English-language volume on the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin's African heritage, she is known for exploring topics—such as Russian chat rooms that focus on the English writer Jane Austen and President Vladimir Putin's fashion

A scene from Václav Havel's adaptation of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*. The 2006 Untitled Theater Company #61 production at Miller Theatre was sponsored by the Harriman Institute and the Barnard Slavic and Theatre Departments. It was codirected by Amy Trompetter of Barnard and Sergei Zemtsov of the Moscow Art Theatre School.

He wanted out of the Soviet Union, and he was considering scuba diving to Turkey under the Black Sea.

choices—that would not occur to many of her contemporaries. Nepomnyashchy's students emphasize the "democratic" approach with which she treats people—putting undergraduates, graduate students, and clerical workers on equal footing with even the most distinguished scholars in her field—and see her as a mentor who will always "have your back." But, most importantly, Nepomnyashchy is someone who sees connections between seemingly unrelated topics, and the efforts she undertook during her eight-year tenure as director (2001 to 2009) have broadened the Harriman Institute's scope in the areas of culture, literature, and the arts, and deepened its ties to Central Asia and the Caucasus.

"It used to be a given that as an educated person, you would be broadly educated," Nepomnyashchy said over lunch at Columbia University's Faculty House. Sitting next to a window overlooking Manhattan, where she has lived since she started her second year as a graduate student at Columbia in 1974 (her first was spent commuting from her hometown, Rumson, New Jersey), she voiced her disappointment with the fact that few modern scholars explore beyond their niches: "The kind of time and thought, and intellectual independence that would allow you to follow your instincts and take your attention away from the immediate goal, is getting lost." Nepomnyashchy, who has always followed her instincts, is thankful to be in the type of university setting where students have the resources to develop a wider perspective. She sees the Harriman Institute, in particular, as "an outpost" where heated cross-disciplinary discussion still exists.

Though she has no direct ties—"My childhood had nothing to do with Russia, I have no Russian blood, and in grade school I studied French"—Nepomnyashchy has been drawn to Russia since she was a little girl, finally pursuing her interest at Pembroke College in Brown University, which was known for having one of the best Russian and French departments in the country. She took a Russian language course her first year (1969–70), but Brown went on strike against the bombings in Cambodia during her second semester, and she says the classes "just stopped," so she "spoke very little Russian." The summer of 1970, she travelled to the Soviet Union for the first time, on the pilot program of the American Institute for Foreign Study.

The group had plans to spend most of its time divided between Moscow and Sochi. While it was in Sochi, a cholera epidemic hit the Soviet Union. In typical Soviet fashion, the authorities left everyone in the dark. Nepomnyashchy and her compatriots stayed put—Sochi was one of the only cities not quarantined—without any knowledge of what was going on and seemingly no way out. (They tried twice to visit Tbilisi and were mysteriously denied entry, one time even making it as far as the Georgian border on a rickety tourist bus.) It was there, on the beach, that Nepomnyashchy met Viacheslav (Slava) Nepomnyashchy, the man who would eventually become her husband. "We were brought together by a cholera epidemic," she reflected (Slava, who had planned to be in Yalta, was only in Sochi because of the quarantine).

That summer, Nepomnyashchy embarked on what she figured was just a fling, but was unknowingly igniting a seven-year uphill battle to get Slava to the United States. "He was a rebel with romantic

From left to right: Catharine Nepomnyashchy and Slava Nepomnyashchy during their first summer together (Sochi, August 1970); Catharine Nepomnyashchy and Slava Nepomnyashchy in their Upper West Side apartment in the late 1970s, within the first years of Slava's arrival to the United States; Olga Nepomnyashchy at the Requiem for Anna Politkovskaya, a puppet performance commemorating the life and death of the Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya (created and directed by Amy Trompetter, October 7, 2007). Watch the performance at http://vimeo.com/793471.

notions," she related. "He wanted out of the Soviet Union, and he was considering scuba diving to Turkey under the Black Sea." He spoke "perfect English," which was a plus, and was arrested for being caught in a "Berezka Bar" (a place designated for foreigners) on the morning Nepomnyashchy left Russia. He was soon let out, and a month after Nepomnyashchy returned to the United States, started sending her letters, initiating a correspondence that would last years. "I was nineteen, I wasn't planning on getting married until well into my thirties, so this was all very abstract," Nepomnyashchy confided. But, the following summer she returned to Russia, spent two months with Slava, and decided to marry him. A wedding, though, was impossible. Slava's father, who was head of the personnel department at Bykovo Airport, "had no desire to see his son emigrate to the United States." When word got out that he wanted to marry an American, Slava was sent to Siberia, "basically into a punishment battalion," explained Nepomnyashchy. He was released two years later and became a *refusenik*. She waited for him to get out of the Soviet Union, finishing college and launching a career in academia.

Nepomnyashchy was not always on the path to become a Russian literature professor. Her dream was to be a United Nations interpreter. After graduating from Brown, she decided to get a Ph.D. in Russian at Columbia University (thinking she needed it to work at the UN), but her adviser at Brown, a Pushkin specialist named Sam Driver, told her: "If you say on your application that you want to study language, they'll throw it in the waste basket." She was nonetheless accepted to the doctoral program at Columbia and studied under the late Rufus Mathewson, then chair of the Slavic Department. He ultimately convinced her "that it was okay to study literature, and stay in academia."

A large part of Nepomnyashchy's graduate career was spent running between the Barnard Slavic Department (where many of the graduate courses were

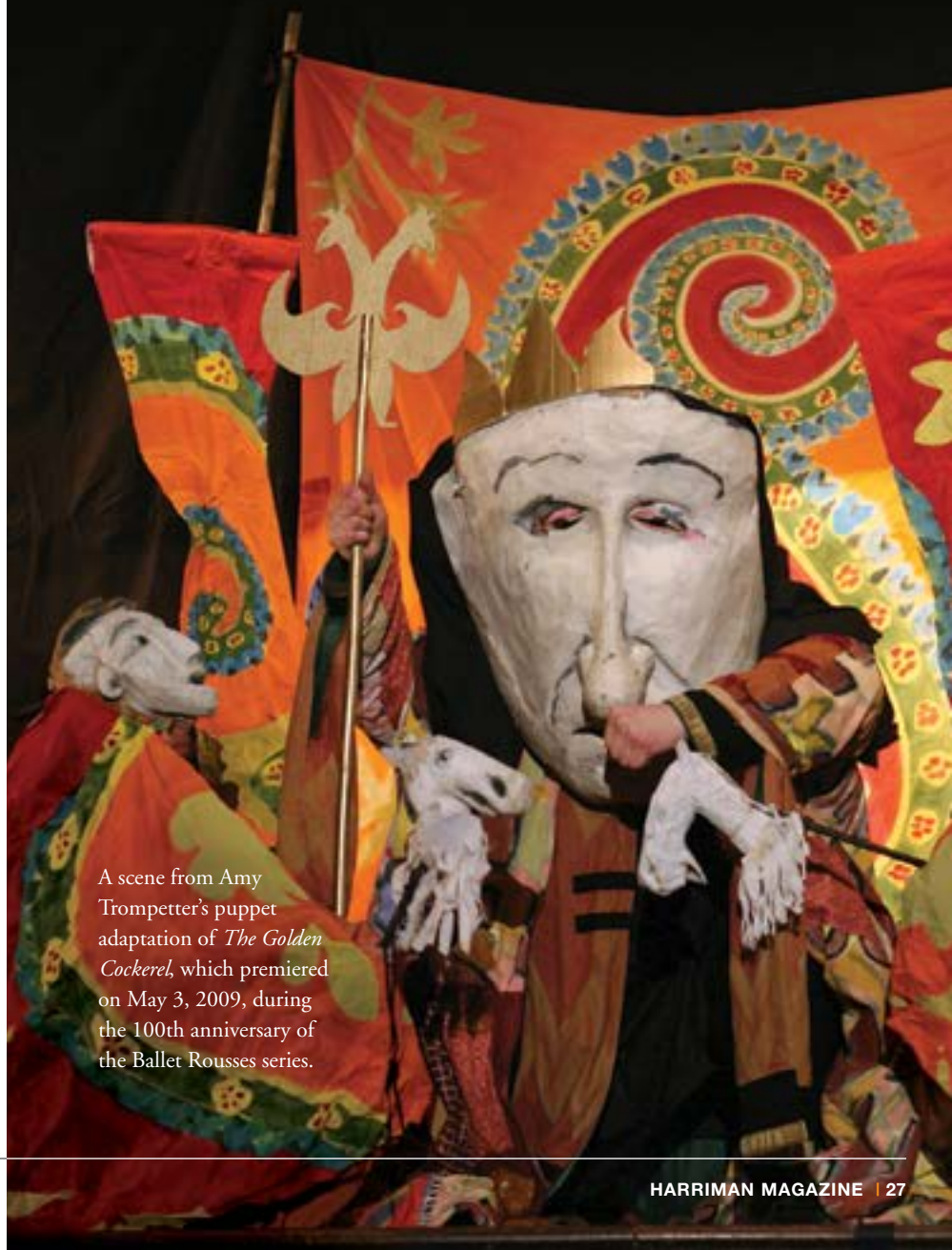
Nepomnyashchy currently serves on the editorial boards of *Slavic Review*, *Novyi zhurnal*, and *La Revue Russe*.

She was president of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Language (AATSEEL) from 2005 until 2007.

She has chaired the Executive Committee of the Slavic Division of the Modern Language Association and served a number of terms on the MLA Delegate Assembly.

She has been on the Board of Directors of AAASS since 2003.

She is recipient of the 2011 AATSEEL Award for Outstanding Service to the Profession.



A scene from Amy Trompetter's puppet adaptation of *The Golden Cockerel*, which premiered on May 3, 2009, during the 100th anniversary of the Ballet Rousses series.

Catharine Nepomnyashchy with Mikhail Gorbachev during his visit to the Harriman Institute on March 11, 2007.

held) and the School of International Affairs (SIA). At that time, the Columbia Slavic Department and the Russian Institute (which became the W. Averell Harriman Institute in 1982) were both in SIA and very much involved with one another. The Institute hosted brown bag lectures every Tuesday and Thursday, "which *everyone* came to," and Nepomnyashchy remembers it as a sort of utopia, "a wonderful place for someone who did not want to be stuck in one discipline."

As a graduate student, Nepomnyashchy longed for a greater sense of community between her colleagues, whom she felt were somewhat fragmented and unfocused. Over lunch at a "mediocre" Mexican restaurant, she and Michael Naydan, another student in the Slavic Department, conceived of a community project—an academic journal run by graduate students and focused on Slavic languages and cultures—that eventually became the *Ulbandus Review*. *Ulbandus*, which means "big exotic wandering animal," a term introduced to the Old Slavs by the Old Goths, began as a vague concept and materialized into a difficult undertaking. In addition to rigorous editing, there was manual labor—"typing and retyping, running to the library, and cutting and pasting," as Nepomnyashchy described in a 2002 article for *Ulbandus*, which is still in existence nearly 40 years later. There were also all sorts of fundraising efforts—bake sales, sales of Soviet posters and knickknacks—to keep the journal afloat ("Sometimes I feel like I spent most of the *Ulbandus* years mass-producing brownies"). The project became a focal point during Nepomnyashchy's years as a Ph.D. student.

During this time, the struggle to get her fiancé, Slava, out of the Soviet Union—false hopes, failed invitations, pleas to the State Department—persisted. Finally, in January 1977, while Nepomnyashchy was studying for her comprehensive examinations, she received an unexpected phone call: "It was a journalist announcing that my fiancé was getting out, asking me what I thought about it." Slava had left a personal message for journalist Tom Kent at the Associated Press, who had gotten to know him well while covering the couple's story. Kent, though, was on leave in the United States, and another journalist took the call; without his knowledge, he turned Slava's message into an article. And so, through the media, Nepomnyashchy discovered that her fiancé would be in the United States later that week.

By U.S. law, the couple had to be married within 90 days of Slava's arrival. Meanwhile, Nepomnyashchy was "a nervous wreck"; she joked that letting Slava out during her exams "was the final revenge of the Soviet government." But, she passed the comps, and two weeks later, on the 90th and final day of the allotted period, they were married.

Perhaps the most exciting period in Nepomnyashchy's early career came during the years surrounding the fall of the Iron Curtain. After years of having her visa denied, Nepomnyashchy was finally allowed entry and began taking frequent

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trips to the Soviet Union. At that time, an intense collaboration developed between American and Russian scholars. In 1989, during a frigid Moscow winter, she became friends with the now prominent Russian journalist Nadezhda Azhgikhina and her husband, the late investigative journalist Yuri Shchekochikhin. Azhgikhina was in the process of finishing her graduate work at Moscow State University and remembers hearing a lot about Nepomnyashchy through mutual acquaintances. The two instantly connected after she spent a week driving Nepomnyashchy around Moscow, taking her to the houses of various Russian writers. "It was an intense and happy time in our lives," said Azhgikhina, recalling the array of projects she started with Nepomnyashchy on topics previously neglected by literary scholars—such as feminism and contemporary Russian culture. The pair were together in August 1991, during the Moscow coup—a transformative moment for both of them—and are currently finishing a book about the event, which is dedicated to their youth and their hopes beyond the Cold War.

The summer of 2001, after an ordeal of equal magnitude to getting Slava out of the Soviet Union, Nepomnyashchy and her husband adopted a two-year-old girl, their daughter Olga, from Russia. (Sadly, Slava passed away only a decade later, on August 18, 2011—the 20th anniversary of the Moscow Coup, and the 41st anniversary of his meeting Nepomnyashchy in Sochi.) The same year as the adoption, Nepomnyashchy became director of the Harriman Institute.

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Her opening reception never took place. It was scheduled for the evening of September 11, 2001. That morning, she took the elevator to the top floor of the School of International and Public Affairs building for a meeting and watched the first tower of the World Trade Center fall. September 11, she would write in the February 2002 *Harriman Institute Newsletter*, "sparked the realization that the United States suffers from a strategically dangerous shortage of regional specialists." The event was also an important geopolitical moment for Russia: Vladimir Putin was the first world leader to call George W. Bush after the attacks. Nepomnyashchy emphasized that this call "put Russia back on the world stage." During the initial months of her directorship, responding to 9/11 in the Harriman Institute's programming became her priority. Along with a variety of panels about the regional and transnational implications of the event, she initiated the "Director's Seminars," an ongoing series of roundtables that would focus on questions about the field of area studies.

On the six-month anniversary of the attacks, Nepomnyashchy arranged for Mikhail Gorbachev to speak at the Institute. "I felt that one way to make my mark was to have an unexpected or particularly big Harriman lecture." To the best of her knowledge, Gorbachev had never spoken at a private university before, or to a public audience in New York City. "In Harriman style, we were very hands on. We paid for the entire event, there was a dinner, and Gorbachev picked the menu."

The Gorbachev lecture set the tone for the rest of her directorship—"The ante was up about visibility," she said. Throughout her tenure, Nepomnyashchy brought in various diplomats, luminaries, and politicians, including Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov (who was then the ambassador to the UN), the

From left to right: Catharine Nepomnyashchy with Mikhail Gorbachev during his March 11, 2007, visit to the Harriman Institute. Roman Khidekel, Leonid Lubianitsky, Russian dancer, choreographer, and actor Mikhail Baryshnikov, Regina Khidekel, Olga Nepomnyashchy, and Catharine Nepomnyashchy at the opening reception for "People," an exhibit of photographs by Leonid Lubianitsky, curated by Regina Khidekel. Olga Nepomnyashchy, flanked by her parents, Slava Nepomnyashchy and Catharine Nepomnyashchy, during a faculty trip to Turkmenistan in 2008.

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famous Albanian writer and poet Ismail Kadare, and the Nobel Prize–winning Hungarian author Imre Kertesz. She also collaborated with the Columbia University World Leaders Forum to host leaders ranging from Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Turkmenistan's Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov to Georgia's Mikheil Saakashvili and Estonia's Toomas Hendrik Ilves. But one of her greatest accomplishments as director was the versatility and creativity she brought to the Institute's programming. "The thing that was most important to me, and that I'm kind of proud of from being director, was trying to involve as many people as possible from different parts of the University."

One such person is Lynn Garafola, Professor of Dance at Barnard College, who first worked with Nepomnyashchy in 2003, during a series of lectures and performances in celebration of the tercentennial of the founding of St. Petersburg. The series contained a segment devoted to ballet, and Garafola partnered with the Institute to stage a performance, a lecture, and demonstration on the choreographer George Balanchine by the ballet dancer Suki Schorer, among other things. "Cathy is someone who makes you feel that you can just run with something, and that generosity of spirit allows people to flourish," said Garafola. She continued her involvement with the Harriman Institute throughout Nepomnyashchy's tenure, co-organizing events such as a series devoted to the 100th anniversary of the Ballets Russes. She stressed how the collaboration provided opportunity for "ballet people who don't necessarily self-identify as Russianists to be in touch with a broader field."

Nepomnyashchy strove to represent the versatility of every issue in her programming. One way she did this was by mounting art exhibits that complemented the Institute's lectures and conferences. At the beginning of her second term, she oversaw the redesign of the Institute's interior, bringing in architects to open up the once cluttered, dusty office (as a former student described it) and create a space where the Institute mounts art exhibits three to four times a year. The first Harriman exhibit was in March 2005—a collection of Horst Tappe photographs titled, "Nabokov in Montreux" that went up in conjunction with other events celebrating the 50th anniversary of Nabokov's most famous novel, *Lolita* (Nepomnyashchy, a Nabokov enthusiast, is currently working on a book titled *Nabokov and His Enemies: Terms of Engagement*). During the 2009 Ballets Russes series, the Institute displayed reproductions from Diaghilev's stage designs, titled "Homage to Diaghilev: Enduring Legacy."

In 2006, when Columbia's President Lee C. Bollinger invited Czech playwright and former president Vaclav Havel for a seven-week residency of lectures, interviews, conversations, and other events organized by the Columbia Arts Initiative, Nepomnyashchy involved the Harriman Institute in the heart of the

Acting director Kimberly Marten presenting Catharine Nepomnyashchy with the 2012 Alumna of the Year Award at the Harriman Institute Alumni Reception, October 25, 2012 (photo: Lynn Saville, Columbia University).

planning, famously collaborating with Columbia's Miller Theatre and Barnard theater professor Amy Trompetter to stage a puppet production of Havel's play *The Beggar's Opera*, and bringing in speakers to complement the event. "The programming Harriman did around Havel's visit completely transformed it, and this was largely a product of Cathy's vision," remarked Christopher W. Harwood, a Czech specialist and former graduate student of Nepomnyashchy's, who is currently a lecturer in Czech at Columbia and a teacher of hers (Nepomnyashchy has a fascination with languages and over the course of her career has taken Czech, Georgian, and Serbo-Croatian, among others—"when I die I will probably be studying some bizarre language," she said, "maybe Papiamento"). Harwood admires the vastness of Nepomnyashchy's imagination and her ability to "see potentialities." He was particularly struck by her idea to invite the historically significant dissident Czech rock band *The Plastic People of the Universe* during Havel's visit. The event was unique in the academic world: "It's one thing having academics in a room talking to one another about The Plastic People of the Universe; it's another thing to have them all at a rock concert," said Harwood. He can still picture Nepomnyashchy dancing in the front row: "I imagined her channeling Stevie Nicks; she was so into it."

Nepomnyashchy, though, extended the Institute's focus in more ways than expanding activities in the cultural sphere. "Cathy made a real attempt to open up the Institute to the Eurasian region," said Alexander Cooley, Tow Professor of Political Science at Barnard College who recently published a book on Central Asia, "to take it seriously, to understand the dynamics." Cooley was part of a delegation of Columbia faculty, initiated and organized by Nepomnyashchy, which travelled to Turkmenistan in both 2008 and 2009, in an effort to establish cooperation on education reform between Columbia and Turkmenistan and to bring over Turkmen students to study at Columbia. He and Nepomnyashchy also took a faculty trip to Georgia, visiting the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia a few months before the Russia-Georgia War. "These trips emphasized Harriman's strong sense of being an important institutional actor in post-Soviet states, and they probably wouldn't have happened without Cathy as director," noted Cooley, adding that "faculty trips are a logistical undertaking and very challenging to put together." Kimberly Marten, acting director of the Harriman Institute (2012–2013) was also a part of the 2008 delegation to Turkmenistan. She sees Nepomnyashchy's ability to connect with people, and her limitless reserve of ideas as "an inspiration," and marvels that while traveling to Georgia or Central Asia for research, everyone she met "seemed to know and ask about Cathy."

Likely, this is because of Nepomnyashchy's ability to draw people in. "One of the best things about knowing Cathy is that there is always something going on with her that's generally more interesting than whatever is going on with you," said her former advisee Karin Isaacson, for whom Nepomnyashchy became a mentor and close friend. "You walk into a room with her and you can't help getting pulled into whatever is already in progress."

Catharine and Olga Nepomnyashchy at the 2012 Harriman Institute Alumni Reception (photo: Lynn Saville, Columbia University).