

DEATH OF IVAN ILYCH

A Full-Length Chamber Opera in One Act
From the 1886 Novella by Leo Tolstoy

CHARACTERS

(4 men, 1 woman, 1 boy)

IVAN ILYCH	<i>Baritone</i> (forties) An unexceptional man and conformist with a high regard for appearances and social standing. (<i>i-vin il-le-ich</i>)
PRASKOVYA FEDOROVNA	<i>Soprano</i> (thirties) Ivan Ilych's wife and mother to his son. A plain and sometimes hostile woman.
GERASIM	<i>Tenor</i> (twenties) Ivan Ilych's manservant. A wholesome and honest peasant. (<i>jer-az-im</i>)
PYOTR IVANOVICH / PRIEST	<i>Bass-Baritone</i> (forties) A fellow judge and colleague; a man who avoids uncomfortable truths. A caring priest who is an idealist. (<i>pee-o-ter</i>)
DOCTOR	<i>Bass</i> (older than fifty) IVAN ILYCH's doctor
VLADIMIR	<i>Non-Singing Role</i> (looks eight years old) Ivan's son. A sensitive child, uncorrupted by society's beliefs.

ORCHESTRATION

String Quintet, Oboe, Piano

TIME AND PLACE

1882, St. Petersburg, Imperial Russia

SETTING

The interior of the house of IVAN ILYCH. It could be a bare stage filled with furniture pieces and no walls.

A Staging Note: This libretto has detailed stage directions and notes for singers. The librettist and composer created these to collaboratively understand mood, tone, pacing, and tempo. They are only suggestions of how the opera could be performed. There is more freedom in singing, staging, and design than the libretto might suggest.

PRELUDE: Ending

SCENE ONE: It is a sad affair, is it not?

[The opera opens with a poorly attended wake. PYOTR is deeply uncomfortable and wonders if the length of his appearance is enough. It's not. PYOTR looks to fill a bit more time and approaches the DOCTOR who sips tea.]

DOCTOR:

Are you family or a friend?

PYOTR:

More a colleague than a friend.

We have known each other since childhood.

We studied law as schoolmates
at the School of Jurisprudence.

THE DOCTOR:

You are both judges?

PYOTR:

Yes. And you?

DOCTOR:

His doctor.

PYOTR:

I was told he was getting better.

I guess that was not so.

[DOCTOR sips his tea.]

PYOTR:

I always meant to see him.

We have all been busy with work.

DOCTOR / PYOTR:

We all have obligations.

Obligations.

PYOTR:

His post was kept open.
Out of respect, you know.
But life moves on.
My brother-in-law will
get his position
My wife says I do nothing
for her family.
Perhaps... You've not met her.

[They both chuckle]

PYOTR:

Nothing to speak of.

PYOTR:

Such a shame.
He was not so very old.
It is all very sad.
But tell me,
What really was wrong?

I see.

A shame.

DOCTOR:

Will you attend the funeral?

PYOTR:

I am afraid I'm busy

DOCTOR / PYOTR:

We all have obligations.
Obligations.

PYOTR:

I am playing bridge tonight.
It's late but still, I hope they will cut me in.

DOCTOR:

Best to put family first.

I'm sure she will be pleased.

DOCTOR:

Did he pass on any property?

DOCTOR:

Such a shame.
He was not so very old.
All very sad.

I could not really say.

He had seen many doctors.
No one could diagnose the ailment.
No one could prescribe the cure.
A shame. A shame.

DOCTOR / PYOTR:
Obligations.

PYOTR:
Speaking of,
I should see the widow before I leave.

DOCTOR:
It was a pleasure to meet you.

DOCTOR:
The pleasure was mine.

[PYOTR approaches PRASKOVYA for a quick goodbye.]

PYOTR:
My condolences, madame.

PRASKOVYA:
Thank you for coming.
Ivan Ilych often spoke of you
as a good friend.

Tout cela a été difficile. (spoken)
Up until the end.
He screamed unceasingly, incessantly.
Not for minutes, but for hours.
Three frightful days of suffering.
Only moments before he died.
When he sent poor Vladimir away.
Now the matters of the funeral.
It distracts rather than consoles.
The expense of it! Who knew?
Two hundred rubles for the plot,
The church service, the choir.
I must take care of it all myself.
How is a widow to grieve?

PYOTR:
Really? Oh yes.
Did he suffer?

PYOTR:
Was he conscious?

How is your son?

PYOTR:
This must be trying.

PRASKOVYA:

This may not be the time, I know,
but there is something I wish to ask.
It is advice on matters of money.
There is the pension, of course,
but it's certainly not enough.
I'm hoping for a grant for a widow in need.
We have large debts and no savings.
It's only Vladimir and myself.
Perhaps, you could help us?

PYOTR:

It never really is.

PYOTR: *(feeling awkward)*

Uh... I... I am not a lawyer.

PRASKOVYA:

Are you not a judge?

PYOTR:

I'm not really the one to ask.

[PRASKOVYA fails to gain more assistance or sympathy from PYOTR. She sighs, stands, and offers him her hand. He presses it.]

PYOTR:

I am sorry for your loss, madam.

PRASKOVYA: *(with annoyance)*

This is all very difficult.

[The DOCTOR and PYOTR approach GERASIM as they both start to make their exit.]

PYOTR / DOCTOR:

Well, Gerasim.

It is a sad affair, is it not?

The passing of your Master.

GERASIM:

We shall all submit to God's will.

Death is the fate for all of us.

DOCTOR:
Respice finem

GERASIM:
Respice finem

PYOTR: *(uncomfortably)*
Yes, of course.

[PYOTR and the DOCTOR exit.]

SCENE TWO: Are you alright?

[IVAN ILYCH, PRASKOVYA, and VLADIMIR are having a quiet evening VLADIMIR reads a book, while IVAN ILYCH and PRASKOVYA look around the newly redecorated parlor. IVAN ILYCH sighs in contentment.]

IVAN ILYCH:
This room turned out just right.

and upholstery
but not overdone.
Yes...
Just right.
Just the way I like it.
Refined and dignified!
Everything in its place.

PRASKOVYA:
The wallpaper
Tasteful.

Yes...
Just right.
Just the way you like it.
Yes! Just right.

[IVAN ILYCH gets up from the armchair but seizes in pain and sits down again.]

PRASKOVYA:
Are you still bruised?

IVAN ILYCH:
Nothing but my pride.

PRASKOVYA:
I remember how you frightened me,
you poor man!

IVAN ILYCH:
You were arranging the drapes,
I had to show you how it's done.
I climbed the ladder and missed a rung.

PRASKOVYA:
Poor thing.
Always so particular

IVAN ILYCH:
I went flying.
I went flying.
Flying!

PRASKOVYA:
You went flying.
Flying.
Flying!

[They both chuckle]

IVAN ILYCH:
I looked ridiculous.
And it hurt like hell!

[They all laugh, and IVAN ILYCH gives VLADIMIR a cheeky wink.]

PRASKOVYA: *(gently scolds)*
Language, Papa!

IVAN ILYCH:
Good thing I was once an athlete.

PRASKOVYA:
Mon coeur, you were never an athlete.

[They chuckle again, but IVAN ILYCH seizes up again in pain. He can hardly breathe.]

PRASKOVYA:
Are you alright?

IVAN ILYCH: *(catching his breath)*
I am fine.

PRASKOVYA:
You're not alright.

IVAN ILYCH:
I said, I'm fine.

PRASKOVYA:
You have been hiding this.

IVAN ILYCH:
I said, I'm fine!

PRASKOVYA:
I want you to see the doctor.

IVAN ILYCH:
Such a fuss.
I said, I'm fine!
You make too much of things.

[The pain in IVAN ILYCH'S side subsides, putting him in a foul mood. He notices a deep scratch on the surface of a side table]

IVAN ILYCH:
Look!
Look at this!
A scratch in our new table!

PRASKOVYA:
We will get it repaired.

We'll buy another table.
We'll buy another table.

IVAN ILYCH:
I don't want it repaired.
I don't want another table!
I don't want another table!
Why do I work myself to death?
Is it so much to ask,
to care for nice things?

PRASKOVYA:
Accidents happen.
Things get broken.
Tables get scratched.
Everything can be fixed! *(spoken with anger)*
We were having a pleasant evening.

IVAN ILYCH: *(coldly)*
Were we?

[PRASKOVYA notices her son.]

PRASKOVYA:

Vladimir, *mon trésor*.

It is time for bed.

I'll come tuck you in.

[VLADIMIR is engrossed in his book.]

IVAN ILYCH: *(with annoyance)*

Listen to your mother!

Go to bed!

[VLADIMIR kisses his parents on the cheeks and exits. IVAN ILYCH looks at his wife with annoyance.]

IVAN ILYCH:

Have you changed your hair?

PRASKOVYA:

I tried something new.

IVAN ILYCH

I prefer it the other way.

[PRASKOVYA does not acknowledge the insult.]

IVAN ILYCH:

I'm going to bed.

PRASKOVYA:

Perhaps that is best.

[IVAN ILYCH realizes he has acted like a cad and softens.]

IVAN ILYCH:

Perhaps you are right.

I will see the doctor.

PRASKOVYA: *(holding herself together)*

I will make the appointment.

IVAN ILYCH:
Good Night.
My apologies.

[PRASKOVYA finally looks up and takes pity.]

PRASKOVYA: *(softy)*
Good night.

IVAN ILYCH:
Good night.

[IVAN ILYCH painfully exits. PRASKOVYA waits until he is gone to cry.]

SCENE THREE: My fall from grace?

[IVAN ILYCH sits on a stool with his jacket and tie off. The doctor stands over him.]

IVAN ILYCH:
Something must be wrong.

DOCTOR:
It is difficult to tell.
Perhaps it was your fall.

IVAN ILYCH:
My fall from grace?

DOCTOR:
Your fall from the ladder.
Besides the pain in your side,
nothing is conclusive.

IVAN ILYCH:
What about my appetite?

DOCTOR:
You needed to lose weight.

IVAN ILYCH:
Well then,

what is to be done?

DOCTOR:

Nothing, really.

Sleep and bedrest

I predict a full recovery.

IVAN ILYCH:

All I want to do is sleep.

I am always irritable.

Everything is upsetting.

DOCTOR:

Sleep is the best...

Do not upset yourself.

DOCTOR:

Follow my instructions:

No rich foods,

full bed rest,

no sturgeon,

no smoking,

no alcohol.

IVAN ILYCH:

Wine, perhaps?

DOCTOR:

Would you like to get better?

IVAN ILYCH:

Yes.

DOCTOR:

Then no.

No wine.

IVAN ILYCH:

When will I see results?

DOCTOR:

When you follow my instructions.

Consider a leave of absence.

I will prescribe you a tonic

and something for the pain.

IVAN ILYCH:

So, if I ignore it, it will go away?

DOCTOR:

Like most things.

IVAN ILYCH:

Thank you, doctor.

DOCTOR:

Remember, bedrest!

I will visit you in a week.

IVAN ILYCH:

Until then.

DOCTOR:

Until then.

IVAN ILYCH/ DOCTOR:

Until then.

SCENE FOUR: It's not really a choice, is it?

[IVAN ILYCH, in a dressing gown, trousers, and slippers, sits in a chair beside the bed. GERASIM closes the curtains for the night and adjusts the bedding. PRASKOVYA fusses. GERASIM goes about his work good-naturedly, while VLADIMIR observes his parents.]

PRASKOVYA:

Have you taken your medicines?

You will not get better if you don't.

IVAN ILYCH:

I did.

PRASKOVYA:

You always forget

and I must remind you.

IVAN ILYCH:

I will!

PRASKOVYA:

You have gotten more disagreeable.

Special meals prepared

and you won't eat.

Staying up late playing cards

against your doctor's orders.

That's a lie!

IVAN ILYCH:

Mush!

Only once!

IVAN ILYCH:

SO WHAT! *(yelling)*

PRASKOVYA:

I am doing this for your sake!

IVAN ILYCH:

Are you? *(spoken)*

[PRASKOVYA throws her hands up and exits.]

PRASKOVYA: *(calling offstage)*

Vladimir!

[The boy jumps down and gives his father a kiss on the cheek, which he returns lovingly.]

PRASKOVYA: *(yelling off stage)*

Vladimir!

[The boy exits quickly.]

IVAN ILYCH:

Gerasim?

If you could?

Our secret, ha?

[GERASIM reaches for the secret stash, opens the bottle, and pours his master a dram of schnapps.]

IVAN ILYCH:

Oh, if you could
move that footstool
under my feet and a pillow.

[GERASIM places IVAN ILYCH'S feet onto the footstools]

GERASIM:

I'll bring two.
If it pleases.

[IVAN ILYCH smiles and nods his head. GERASIM lifts IVAN ILYCH'S legs and places them on top of the pillows.]

IVAN ILYCH:

Much better.
Gerasim, are you busy?

GERASIM:

I've done everything
except chop the wood.

IVAN ILYCH:

Hold my legs up a bit higher,
if you could?

[GERASIM stands before IVAN ILYCH and lifts his master's legs higher.]

IVAN ILYCH:

I'm not sure why that feels better.
I despise being ill.
Your mistress is intolerable.
Although I'm not looking
forward to returning to work.
It makes me wonder why I became a judge.
Well, this looks ridiculous.

[They both chuckle. IVAN ILYCH puts his feet down and GERASIM returns the stool.]

GERASIM:

Was your father a judge?

IVAN ILYCH:

My father was a bureaucrat.

My life was planned.

I did what was expected.

I would always become a judge.

I'm not sure why I did it.

There was never any joy.

I guess one is rarely satisfied
with what they have.

GERASIM: *(naïvely)*

Why is that?

IVAN ILYCH:

It's human nature to
always compare.

Always want better,
always want more.

It never seems enough
until it's taken from you.

GERASIM:

You have a wonderful life.

IVAN ILYCH: *(with impatience)*

I have nothing to complain of.

IVAN ILYCH / GERASIM

To complain of.

IVAN ILYCH: *(in a reverie)*

I loved my independence.

I loved my time in college.

The freedom of my youth.

Il faut que jeunesse se passe.

That spirited time when
youth must have its fling.
It was when I felt the most alive.
When everything lay ahead.
A joy I never felt at the time.
It's not really a choice, is it?
Marriage, I mean.
I guess it was love.
At least as I understood it.
We knew the match was not ideal,
but still suitable.
She was no great beauty
but still pretty enough.
She told me she loved me.
So, I thought, "it's time.
Why shouldn't I marry?"
Don't misunderstand me.
I love my wife and my son.
Still, if I had a chance
To make the choice again,
I wouldn't.

GERASIM:
What choice would you have made?

[IVAN ILYCH cannot answer and downs the glass of schnapps.]

GERASIM:
Would you like more schnapps?
Our secret.

IVAN ILYCH:
No. I'm sorry, Gerasim.
You have logs to chop.
I keep you from your work.

GERASIM:
This is my work, sir.
Tending to the family.

IVAN ILYCH:

I take too much of your time.

GERASIM:

It's no trouble, sir.

No trouble at all.

FIRST INTERLUDE: Moonlight

[It is night, and IVAN ILYCH is alone in his bed. He sits up and looks about. He is finally left alone with his thoughts. Everything is still. He notices a crack of light coming from between the drapes. He becomes curious, gets out of bed painfully, and walks across the room. He looks behind the curtain and takes in the beauty of the full moon. He then throws the curtains open, and the room fills with moonlight. IVAN ILYCH is transfixed and reaches to place his hand against the glass. He considers the larger world, the ineffability of life, and the unfathomable distance of the moon. He hangs his head, knowing some things are beyond his reach and can never be fully understood.]

SCENE FIVE: Does it really matter?

[It is morning. GERASIM enters a basin of warm water, a towel, and a new nightshirt. IVAN ILYCH looks terrible.]

GERASIM:

Did you sleep well, sir?

IVAN ILYCH:

No.

GERASIM:

Would you like tea?

IVAN ILYCH:

No.

GERASIM:

Would you like to move onto the...

IVAN ILYCH:

What time is it?

[GERASIM shrugs]

IVAN ILYCH:

My watch,
if you could.

[GERASIM points to the pocket watch on the side table. IVAN ILYCH checks the time.]

IVAN ILYCH:

Half-past eight.
Are they up?

GERASIM:

Vladimir has left for school.
The mistress is still in bed.
She told me to wake her
if you called.

IVAN ILYCH:

Let her sleep.

GERASIM:

The doctor comes today.
Wash up and take this fresh shirt.

IVAN ILYCH:

Does it really matter?

GERASIM:

You'll feel better being clean.

[IVAN ILYCH grabs the nightshirt and steps behind the dressing screen to put it on.]

IVAN ILYCH:

Gerasim.

GERASIM:

Yes, sir?

IVAN ILYCH:

You must forgive me
for being helpless.

GERASIM

Why, sir?

It's no trouble at all.

IVAN ILYCH:

Things will be easier for everyone
once I'm gone.

GERASIM: *(taken back)*

Once you're gone?

IVAN ILYCH:

No one is saying this.
I'm not getting any better
and I feel that I'm dying.

GERASIM:

You'll get better.

You'll see.

IVAN ILYCH:

I'm not.

Thank you, Gerasim.

Perhaps I'll have some tea.

Yes, bring me tea.

[GERASIM nods and a bell is heard.]

GERASIM:

That must be the doctor.

Shall I send him in?

[IVAN ILYCH shrugs. GERASIM exits and quickly returns with the DOCTOR.]

DOCTOR: *(cheerfully)*
Good Morning!
Goodness, it is cold.
How are we feeling today?

[DOCTOR takes IVAN ILYCH's wrist to check his pulse.]

IVAN ILYCH:
I'm in agony.

DOCTOR:
Just relax and breathe slowly.

[DOCTOR takes out his stethoscope and listens to his heart.]

DOCTOR:
How are you sleeping?

IVAN ILYCH:
If only it would come quicker.

[DOCTOR checks the glands under his jaw.]

DOCTOR:
I will prescribe a sedative.

IVAN ILYCH:
This cannot continue on.

[DOCTOR places the stethoscope on his back.]

DOCTOR:
Inhale.
Now hold your breath.
Now exhale.

IVAN ILYCH:
Always the same.

DOCTOR:

This would be easier
if you were quieter!

[DOCTOR begins respiratory percussion by placing one hand on IVAN ILYCH'S back and tapping with the other.]

IVAN ILYCH:

Forever the pain.

[DOCTOR taps.]

DOCTOR:

Perhaps more morphine.

IVAN ILYCH:

This is impossible!

[DOCTOR taps.]

DOCTOR:

I will prescribe you more.

IVAN ILYCH:

An hour and then another.

[DOCTOR taps.]

DOCTOR:

Your lungs sound better.

IVAN ILYCH:

You're not listening to me!

[GERASIM returns with tea service.]

IVAN ILYCH: *(to GERASIM)*

I'll have a cup, please.

DOCTOR:

In the middle of an examination?

[GERASIM pours and hands him a cup of tea.]

IVAN ILYCH:

Yes. We are done

DOCTOR:

No. We are not.

IVAN ILYCH:

If I'm not going to die today,
and you'll not prescribe a cure,
at least allow me this simple pleasure.
Let me enjoy my tea in peace!
Good day.

[IVAN ILYCH ignores everyone and sips his tea.]

SCENE SIX: Do you not remember?

[PRASKOVYA enters grandly in a lovely evening dress and fine jewelry. She looks both guilty and pleased with herself. PRASKOVYA realizes her husband is asleep and wonders if she should wake him. VLADIMIR enters in an overcoat and stands far away, afraid to move closer. IVAN ILYCH wakes and looks at them confused.]

IVAN ILYCH:

Who's there?

PRASKOVYA: *(taken back)*

Mon coeur. It's me.

[IVAN ILYCH sits up with more lucidness]

IVAN ILYCH:

Oh? Oh, yes.

Where are you going?

PRASKOVYA:

Where am I going?

Do you not remember?

I told you this morning.

Do you not remember?

We're going to the theatre.

Do you not remember?

You told me, "Take Vladimir."

Do you not remember?

You insisted on the box.

Do you not remember?

Sarah Bernhardt, remember?

[IVAN ILYCH struggles to remember but gives up.]

PRASKOVYA:

I would not go otherwise.

Do you not remember?

But the box is paid for.

Do you not remember?

Helena is going.

Do you not remember?

She refused to go alone.

Do you not remember?

The play is called Fédora.

Do you not remember?

Sarah Bernhardt, such a talent.

Peerless, entrancing,

the elegance and realism of her acting.

I am certain, I am certain, I am certain,

it will be a lovely evening!

IVAN ILYCH: *(drained of energy)*

I'm sure.

[PRASKOVYA takes pity on her husband.]

PRASKOVYA:

How are you feeling?

[IVAN ILYCH shrugs.]

PRASKOVYA:

Would you prefer I stay home?

IVAN ILYCH:

No. Please go.

PRASKOVYA:

Vladimir, *mon trésor*.

Remember my opera glasses.

Tell Gerasim to bring my cloak.

The carriage is waiting.

[VLADIMIR exits and PRASKOVYA kisses IVAN ILYCH on the cheek. He is repelled.]

PRASKOVYA:

Sleep well.

I will see you when...

IVAN ILYCH:

Please go!

PRASKOVYA:

Perhaps you need more morphine.

I shall have Gerasim give you more.

Otherwise, we will be...

IVAN ILYCH:

Go away!

PRASKOVYA:

I know you are in pain,

so I've tried to be patient

but I will not have you spoil my evening!

I deserve this.

[She smooths out her dress and exits, her head held high. IVAN ILYCH is relieved she is gone. GERASIM enters and quietly prepares a morphine shot for his master. He delivers the injection.]

GERASIM:

This will ease the pain?

IVAN ILYCH:

No. It never does.

GERASIM:

Shall I hold your legs?

IVAN ILYCH:

It no longer helps.

GERASIM:

Of course, it does.

IVAN ILYCH:

Please, please leave me.

[GERASIM quietly exits and VAN ILYCH looks up in despair.]

IVAN ILYCH:

To suffer unceasing agonies.

To ponder the unsolvable.

The questions are the same.

The incomprehensible.

The unanswerable.

Why must this be so...

why must this be so?

Beyond this,

besides this,

is there truly nothing?

Can this be death?

Why death?

With no reason to look forward,

I must now live in the past.

Memories most remote

of my childhood long, long ago.

My nurse, my brothers, our toys,
hot summer days,
ripe French plums,
warm cherry tarts.
The memory of their taste.
To know now what I lost.

Life, a falling stone,
flies further and further
towards its terrible end.
Flies further and further.
I fly! I fly!

Life starts as a bright spot
and slowly becomes dimmer,
afterwards only darker,
then proceeding,
proceeding more rapidly,
more rapidly, more rapidly,
more rapidly, more rapidly,
rapidly, rapidly, rapidly
rapid, rapid, rapid.
Why did I think I still had time?

Life, a falling stone,
flies further and further
towards its terrible end,
flies further and further
I fly!

Comprehending the impossible.
An explanation, there is none.
Have I lived a life worth living?
Having done what was expected?
My life has no meaning.
My life had been
the most simple,
the most ordinary,
the most terrible.