

DEATH OF IVAN ILYCH

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

Music by John Young
Libretto by Alan Olejniczak
Dramaturgy by Amanda Clup

A Co-Premiere Partnership
With Orlando Opera
And Thompson Street Opera Company

John Young
4446 N. Lake Dr
Sarasota, FL 34232
404-630-3022
jmy1tenor@gmail.com
www.johnyoung-composer.com

Alan Olejniczak
672 Teresita Blvd.
San Francisco, CA 94127
415-728-1111
alanlolen@gmail.com
www.alanolejniczak.com

SUMMARY

We start at the end; Pyotr Ivanovich arrives at a wake to pay his respects to Praskovya Fedorovna, the widow of Ivan Ilych. Praskovya is understandably distraught but asks Pyotr Ivanovich for assistance as a widow in need. She hopes for a greater pension. He sympathizes, but feels he is not the one to ask. Pyotr Ivanovich meets with Ivan Ilych's small son, Vladimir, and then the doctor. Social pleasantries give way to the cause of Ivan Ilych's death. The doctor admits sadly he could not diagnose the ailment, nor prescribe a cure. They agree it's a shame that Ivan Ilych died so young. Gerasim, Ivan Ilych's manservant, reminds them that death is a fate for us all - *respice finem*.

We go back to the beginning and find the family at dinner. Ivan Ilych complains of having no appetite and everything tastes off. The stabbing pain in his side returns, leaving him in a foul mood. Perhaps it was his fall off the ladder? Praskovya asks her husband to see a doctor and Ivan Ilych reluctantly agrees.

The doctor assures Ivan Ilych that while he could not identify the problem, he expects a full recovery if he avoids rich foods and alcohol. He also recommends time off work to rest. Later, Praskovya fusses over her husband, who appears ungrateful for her help. Once gone, Gerasim pours a dram of schnapps for his master and holds his feet up, which gives Ivan Ilych some relief from the pain. Ivan Ilych wonders aloud why he ever became a judge, a position that has brought him no joy. He then laments his unhappy marriage. "I guess it was love. At least as I understood it."

It is night and Ivan Ilych is alone with his thoughts. He notices a crack of light coming from between the drapes. He painfully gets out of bed and looks behind the curtain to take in the beauty of the full moon. 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.

Gerasim wakes Ivan Ilych after a difficult night's sleep and offers his master some tea – he declines. Gerasim then gives Ivan Ilych a sponge bath and a fresh shirt for the doctor's visit. Ivan Ilych feels better and agrees to the tea. The doctor arrives and begins his examination. Ivan Ilych laments his sleepless nights and constant pain, but feels ignored when the doctor suggests more morphine. Ivan Ilych cuts the doctor's visit short when Gerasim arrives with tea. "If I am not going to die today, and you'll not prescribe a cure. Let me enjoy my tea in peace."

Praskovya, dressed elegantly for an evening out, reminds Ivan Ilych she is taking Vladimir to the theater. "Do you not remember?" He does not. She continues on, but Ivan Ilych finally becomes annoyed and asks her to leave. Praskovya will not have her disagreeable husband spoil her evening and leaves. Gerasim injects his master with morphine to ease the pain and Ivan Ilych awakens in a fever dream. He ponders the unsolvable and incomprehensible questions of his life. He recalls his childhood and believes his life like a falling stone, "flying further and further towards its terrible end." He questions if he lived a life worth living? He comes to believe his life,

up until now, has been: "The most simple. The most ordinary. The most terrible." Praskovya returns unexpectedly, but Ivan Ilych is confused why she is back so soon, His wife states she's been gone for hours and already late. Ivan Ilych, knowing he has not been a loving husband, asks his wife for forgiveness. Praskovya is moved and together they lovingly recall their courtship. She tells him she fell in love with his dancing and they waltz for a bit in reminiscence. Ivan Ilych's knees buckle and they are both reminded again that he is dying. Both admit to being scared for what lies ahead.

Praskovya invites the priest to their home so her husband may confess and receive communion; he will not go to heaven otherwise. Ivan Ilych has no interest in redemption and feels he is already damned. He confesses to the priest he led an unworthy life of pleasant falsehoods. He lived for the expectations and the approval of others. The priest reminds Ivan Ilych these are not sins. Ivan Ilych questions God and asks why he allows suffering. The priest states he will return when Ivan Ilych's heart is open to God. The priest finally leaves, and Ivan Ilych feels renewed and hopeful. Perhaps he has given up too early. He wants to live a different, better life. Praskovya is thrilled.

Praskovya is alone with the doctor. He states that there are no other treatments available for her husband. Praskovya says she will find another doctor who will listen; she wants her husband to live. The doctor tells her Ivan Ilych's death is a certainty and both must accept this irrefutable fact. Later Ivan Ilych angrily calls out to God. "If life has no meaning, then why create life? Why was he put here, if only to die? His questions go unanswered.

It's late at night and Praskovya is holding vigil over her husband. Both are asleep when their son Vladimir enters the bedroom. The boy is unable to understand fully what is happening, but feels he belongs here with his dying father and grieving mother. The boy takes a throw from the bed and curls up at the foot of his father's bed. His mother wakes and beckons Vladimir in her arms. Praskovya hums the boy a gentle lullaby and soon they are both asleep.

The priest, the doctor, Praskovya and Gerasim pray together for the dying man. The doctor calls everyone to the deathbed to say goodbye. Vladimir, overwhelmed with grief, calls out to his father and Ivan Ilych momentarily regains consciousness. The boy falls into his father's arms and Ivan Ilych asks his son and wife for forgiveness. Ivan Ilych sends the boy away so he will not witness his death. In delirium, Ivan Ilych calls for death and finds light at the bottom. He dies with joy.

CHARACTERS

(4 men, 1 woman, 1 boy)

IVAN ILYCH	<i>Lyric Baritone</i> (forties) An unexceptional man and a 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, a pragmatist.
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 set pieces with no walls. Laying on the bed in repose is the deceased IVAN ILYCH. Next to the bed sits VLADIMIR, head-in-hands. The side table is filled with Russian icons. PRASKOVYA sits on a velvet pouf while DOCTOR sips tea. GERASIM stands next to a tea cart with a samovar.

A Staging Note: *This libretto has detailed stage directions and notes for singers. These were created by the librettist and composer for a collaborative understanding of mood, tone, pacing and tempo. They are suggestions of how the opera could be performed. There is more freedom in singing, staging and design than the libretto might suggest.*

OPERA STRUCTURE

PRELUDE:	Ending Orchestral
SCENE ONE:	It is a sad affair, is it not? <i>PRASKOVYA, PYOTR IVANOVICH, GERASIM, DOCTOR</i>
SCENE TWO:	Are you alright? <i>IVAN ILYCH, PRASKOVYA</i>
SCENE THREE:	My fall from grace? <i>IVAN ILYCH, DOCTOR</i>
SCENE FOUR:	It's not really a choice, is it? <i>IVAN ILYCH, GERASIM, PRASKOVYA</i>
FIRST INTERLUDE:	Moonlight Orchestral
SCENE FIVE:	Does it really matter? <i>IVAN ILYCH, GERASIM, PRASKOVYA, DOCTOR</i>
SCENE SIX:	Do you not remember? <i>IVAN ILYCH, PRASKOVYA</i>
SCENE SEVEN:	Am I not already dying? <i>IVAN ILYCH, PRASKOVYA, PRIEST</i>
SCENE EIGHT:	What shall I tell my husband? <i>PRASKOVYA, DOCTOR</i>
SCENE NINE:	Are you still there? <i>IVAN ILYCH, GERASIM</i>
SECOND INTERLUDE:	Lullaby <i>PRASKOVYA</i>
SCENE TEN:	Where is death? <i>ENSEMBLE</i>
FINALE:	Beginning Oboe solo
PRELUDE:	Ending

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

[GERASIM pours tea for his mistress, who is dressed in black with lace veil. He hands PRASKOVYA the cup and saucer. GERASIM offers her a small pastry on a plate PRASKOVYA accepts but does not eat it. PYOTR enters from the outside. He brushes off the snow and PYOTR hands GERASIM his bowler. GERASIM then helps him off with his long overcoat. PYOTR sits beside the widow on the pouf. GERASIM offers him tea but is waved away. PRASKOVYA takes out a cambric handkerchief and weeps. There is the awkward tension of "what does one say?" PYOTR takes the widow's hand awkwardly.]

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?

This may not be the time, I know,

but there is something I wish to ask.

It is advice on matters of money.

PRASKOVYA:

There is the pension, of course,

but it's certainly not enough.

I'm hoping for a grant for a widow in need.

PYOTR:

Really? Oh yes.

Did he suffer?

PYOTR:

Was he conscious?

How is your son?

PYOTR:

This must be trying.

PYOTR:

It never really is.

We have large debts and no savings.
It's only Vladimir and myself.
Perhaps you could help us?

PYOTR: *(feeling awkward)*
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:
This is all very difficult.

[PRASKOVYA sits and turns away to drink her tea. PYOTR crosses over to the bed and gently tussles VLADIMIR'S hair. The boy looks up confused and deeply saddened. PYOTR looks down at the IVAN ILYCH and shakes his head with an expression of, "I'm glad it's not me." He then becomes strangely fascinated and begins to examine the corpse. GERASIM enters with a small apothecary bottle. PYOTR is now inclined to make the sign of the cross, bows his head, and clasp his hands in reverence. "Was that the correct thing to do?" Who knows? GERASIM begins to sprinkle a small amount of powder around the edges of the bed. PRASKOVYA exits and PYOTR crosses over to the DOCTOR who is now pouring more 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 / PYOR:

We all have obligations.

Obligations.

PYOTR:

His post was kept open.

Out of respect, you know.

But life moves on.

PYOTR:

My brother-in-law will

get his position

My wife says I do nothing

for her family.

PYOTR:

You've not met her.

DOCTOR:

Best to put family first.

She'll be pleased.

DOCTOR:

Did he pass-on any property?

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:
Such a shame.

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.

[PYOTR looks about hoping he now filled this social obligation. He eyes the door, looking past the DOCTOR.]

PYOTR:
It was a pleasure to meet you.

DOCTOR:
The pleasure was mine.

[They shake hands.]

PYOTR:
Gerasim, if you please.

[GERASIM exits quickly.]

DOCTOR:
Will you attend the funeral?

PYOTR:
I am afraid I'm do in court.

DOCTOR / PYOR:
We all have obligations.
Obligations.

[GERASIM returns with his coat and hat.]

PYOTR: (to the DOCTOR)
I am playing bridge tonight.
It's late but still I'm hoping they will cut me in.

DOCTOR:
Obligations.

[GERASIM helps him with his coat.]

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

DOCTOR / GERASIM:
respice finem

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

[PYOTR exits.]

SCENE TWO: Are you alright?

[Sitting around a table for dinner are IVAN ILYCH, PRASKOVYA, and VLADIMIR. GERASIM stands attentively nearby and oversees the soup course. VLADIMIR slouches and plays with his spoon. He eats occasionally. IVAN ILYCH pushes away his soup plate. PRASKOVYA, who was enjoying her soup, notices this and sighs.]

PRASKOVYA:
It is your favorite.

IVAN ILYCH:
I have no appetite.

PRASKOVYA:
Ivan Ilych, you haven't eaten.

IVAN ILYCH:
Everything tastes off.
Then the ache in my side.
It has been this way for weeks.

PRASKOVYA:
Are you still bruised?

IVAN ILYCH:
Nothing but my pride.

PRASKOVYA:
I remember how you frightened me,
You poor man.

[They both chuckle]

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 laugh.]

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

[They both laugh, including VLADIMIR.]

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

[IVAN ILYCH gives VLADIMIR a cheeky wink.]

IVAN ILYCH:
Good thing I was once an athlete.

PRASKOVYA:
Mon Coeur, you were never an athlete.

[They laugh again but IVAN ILYCH stops suddenly and seizes up from a pain in his side.]

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:
I said I'm fine!

[The pain in IVAN ILYCH'S side subsides but it has left him in a foul mood.]

IVAN ILYCH:

Such a fuss.

You make too much of things.

[PRASKOVYA acquiesces and signals GERASIM to remove the soup course. VLADIMIR puts his elbow on the table and IVAN ILYCH notices.]

IVAN ILYCH:

No elbows on the table.

[VLADIMIR obeys. GERASIM places dinner plates before each of them. IVAN ILYCH picks up his plate and examines it.]

IVAN ILYCH:

A chip. You see. Right here.

PRASKOVYA:

Gerasim, bring him another.

IVAN ILYCH:

I don't want another!

PRASKOVYA:

Bring him another plate.

Bring him another plate.

IVAN ILYCH:

I don't want another plate!

I don't want another plate!

IVAN ILYCH:

I am not hungry.

PRASKOVYA:

You must eat!

IVAN ILYCH:

Is it so much to ask,
to care for nice things?!

PRASKOVYA:

Accidents happen,

Things get broken

and china chips!

[IVAN ILYCH has had enough and un-expectantly throws the plate to the floor. It smashes. PRASKOVA and VLADIMIR are shocked.]

IVAN ILYCH:
There! That fixes it!

[GERASIM breaks the tension by gathering the pieces of the broken plate from the floor and exits. PRASKOVYA gathers her dignity.]

PRASKOVYA: *(coldly)*
We were having a pleasant dinner.

IVAN ILYCH:
Were we?

[GERASIM returns with a platter of food for silver service. PRASKOVYA serves herself then GERASIM serves VLADIMIR by placing food on his plate. They sit in uncomfortable silence. PRASKOVYA tries to eat but notices her son. Then with a knowing look to her husband.]

PRASKOVYA:
Vladimir, mon trésor.
Sit up straight and eat your food.
Behave like a gentleman.

IVAN ILYCH:
Listen to your mother.

[IVAN ILYCH looks at his wife with annoyance.]

IVAN ILYCH:
Have you changed your hair?

PRASKOVYA: *(brightly)*
I tried something new.

IVAN ILYCH
I prefer it the other way.

[PRASKOVYA does not acknowledge the insult and she and VLADIMIR eat in silence. IVAN ILYCH pulls back his chair and stands.]

IVAN ILYCH:
I'm going to bed.

PRASKOVYA: *(without looking up)*
Perhaps that is best.

[IVAN ILYCH bends down to VLADIMIR who kisses his father on the cheek. VLADIMIR looks at his father with confusion. IVAN ILYCH realizes he has acted like a cad and softens.]

IVAN ILYCH: *(to his wife)*
Perhaps you are right.
I will see the Doctor.

PRASKOVYA: *(holding herself together and not looking up)*
I will make the appointment.

IVAN ILYCH:
Good Night.

[IVAN ILYCH waits for response.]

IVAN ILYCH:
My apologies.

[PRASKOVYA finally looks up and takes pity.]

PRASKOVYA: *(softy)*
Good Night.

IVAN ILYCH: *(softy)*
Good Night.

[IVAN ILYCH exits slowly. PRASKOVYA waits until he is gone to cry into her napkin.]

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: *(shrugs)*

It is difficult to tell.

DOCTOR:

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 bed rest

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 medicine.

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, bed rest!
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 sits on the bed and 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
That you won't eat.

IVAN ILYCH:
Mush!

Staying up late playing cards
Against your doctor's orders. Only once!
That's a lie!

IVAN ILYCH:
So what! *(yelling)*

PRASKOVYA:
I am doing this for your sake!

IVAN ILYCH:
Are you? *(spoken)*

[They both sigh deeply. PRASKOVYA throws her hands up and exits.]

PRASKOVYA: *(calling off stage)*
Vladimir!

[The boy jumps down and gives his father a kiss on the cheek. It's returned lovingly.]

PRASKOVYA: *(yelling off stage)*
Vladimir!

[IVAN ILYCH playfully swats his son's bottom and the boy exits quickly.]

IVAN ILYCH:
Gerasim?

GERASIM:
Yes, Sir.

[IVAN ILYCH holds up an empty glass he's been hiding from his wife.]

IVAN ILYCH:
If you could?

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

IVAN ILYCH:
Our secret, ha?

[IVAN ILYCH gives him a wink and drinks. GERASIM smiles without judgment.]

IVAN ILYCH:
Oh, If you could
Move that footstool
Under my feet
And a pillow.

[GERASIM does and raises and places IVAN ILYCH'S feet onto it.]

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.

GERASIM:
I'll stay awhile if you like.

IVAN ILYCH:

Well, this looks ridiculous.

[They both chuckle.]

GERASIM:

No matter, Sir.

IVAN ILYCH:

I dislike 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.

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:

I had a wonderful childhood.

I loved my time in college.

The freedom of my youth.

Il faut que jeunesse se passe.

GERASIM: *(not understanding French)*

What does that mean?

IVAN ILYCH:

Youth must have its fling.

[GERASIM smiles knowingly]

IVAN ILYCH:

It was when I felt most alive.

When everything lay ahead.

A joy I never felt at the time.

It's not really a choice, is it?

GERASIM:

Marriage, you mean?

IVAN ILYCH:

I guess it was love.

At least as I understood it.

We knew the match was not ideal,
but still suitable.

I enjoyed her company
and both parents approved.

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 is unable to answer. He pours more schnapps for himself and sips.]

GERASIM:
Would you like your legs a little higher?

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:
You can't keep holding up my feet.

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 and gets out of bed painfully and makes his way across the room. He looks behind the curtain, 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 out 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 with a pitcher of warm water, a basin, a towel, and a new nightshirt. GERASIM draws back the curtains and morning light pours in. IVAN ILYCH rouses from sleep and sits up; he 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]

My watch,

If you could.

[GERASIM hands IVAN ILYCH his pocket watch. He 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 for her.

IVAN ILYCH:

Let her sleep.

GERASIM:

The doctor comes today.
I'll give you a bath and a fresh shirt.

IVAN ILYCH:

Does it really matter?

GERASIM:

You'll feel better being clean.

[GERASIM helps IVAN ILYCH out of his nightshirt and pulls it over his head.]

IVAN ILYCH:

Gerasim.

GERASIM:

Yes, sir?

IVAN ILYCH:

You must forgive me
for being helpless.

[GERASIM pours the water into the basin and then soaps a washcloth for a sponge bath in bed.]

GERASIM

Why, Sir?

It's no trouble at all.

[He begins to wash IVAN ILYCH over the following.]

IVAN ILYCH:
Things will be easier for everyone
Once I'm gone.

GERASIM: *(taken back)*
Once you're gone?

IVAN ILYCH:
No one 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.

[GERASIM begins to towel dry his master and then helps IVAN ILYCH into a fresh nightshirt and then combs his hair. GERASIM hands him a hand mirror. IVAN ILYCH looks at himself and appraises himself. He smiles weakly. He does feel better.]

IVAN ILYCH:
Thank you, Gerasim
Perhaps I'll have some tea.
Yes, bring me tea.

GERASIM:
Of course, sir.

[GERASIM quickly gathers the wash basin, towel, old nightshirt and comb and then a distant knock from the front door.]

GERASIM:
That must be the doctor.
Shall I send him in?

[IVAN ILYCH shrugs. GERASIM exits and quickly returns with the DOCTOR who takes off his gloves.]

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

[DOCTOR rubs his hands to warm them. He then takes his wrist to check his pulse.]

IVAN ILYCH:
I am 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:

No. 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.

IVAN ILYCH:

Let me enjoy my tea in peace!
Good day...

[IVAN ILYCH ignores everyone, sips his tea and stares out the window.]

SCENE SIX: Do you not remember?

[IVAN ILYCH sleeps fitfully. There is now a Russian icon on the side table.

PRASKOVYA enters grandly in a lovely evening dress and fine jewelry. She looks both guilty and pleased with herself. She hopes tonight will be a welcome distraction.

PRASKOVYA realizes her husband is asleep and wonders if she should wake him.

VLADIMIR enters in an overcoat and gloves. He stands at a distance, 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.]

I would not go otherwise.

Do you not remember?

But the box is paid for.

Do you not remember?

Helena and daughter were going.

Do you not remember?

They couldn't go alone.

Do you not remember?

It is *Adrienne Lecouvreur*.

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 stands and 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 and he settles back. 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 but sits on a chair near the bedroom door, alert to his Master's call. IVAN ILYCH looks up in despair and then with growing anger.]

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! 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.

[PRASKOVYA tiptoes past the dozing GERASIM and approaches IVAN ILYCH who is startled at her return.]

IVAN ILYCH:
Have you not left?

PRASKOVYA:
The play has long finished
and we are returning.

PRASKOVYA:
It has been hours and
Already quite late.
I just tucked Vladimir into bed.

[She sits on the side of his bed.]

PRASKOVYA:
Have you been awake all this time?

IVAN ILYCH: *(confused and near tears)*
I'm not sure.

[PRASKOVYA tucks him back in.]

PRASKOVYA:
Are you in pain?

[IVAN ILYCH is at a loss for words and she takes pity. He imagines her before as a beautiful young woman. IVAN ILYCH takes her hand.]

IVAN ILYCH: *(spoken tenderly)*
Forgive me.

PRASKOVYA: *(spoken dismissively)*
Mon coeur.

IVAN ILYCH:

Forgive me for not understanding.
Forgive me for not being tender.

PRASKOVYA: *(taken back)*

Mon coeur.

IVAN ILYCH:

I'm scared for myself.
I am scared for you.

PRASKOVYA: *(sadly)*

Mon coeur.

IVAN ILYCH:

You will lose your husband.
Our son will lose his father.
Forgive me.

[PRASKOVA takes his hand and places it on her heart. She's forgotten she once loved this man.]

PRASKOVYA: *(tenderly)*

Mon coeur, of course.

IVAN ILYCH:

Is this how it ends?
Remember we were once in love.
At the altar of our wedding,
we promised to grow old together.

[He kisses her hand. It's been years since he was this kind.]

PRASKOVYA:

Remember our courtship?

IVAN ILYCH:

I remember how you pursued me.

PRASKOVYA:

I was determined to make you love me.

IVAN ILYCH:

You used everything short of black magic.

PRASKOVYA:

You do not know that.

IVAN ILYCH/ PRASKOVYA:

You cast a spell,
to be sure.
I was smitten.

IVAN ILYCH:

Was it my charm?
My good looks?

PRASKOVYA: (*teasingly*)

Charm?
Good Looks?
You have neither.

IVAN ILYCH:

My sense of humor?
My *savoir faire*?

PRASKOVYA:

No. Not that either.

IVAN ILYCH:

Then what was it?

PRASKOVYA:

It was your dancing.
Your confidence,
Power and grace.

IVAN ILYCH:

I loved dancing with you.

IVAN ILYCH/ PRASKOVYA:

Swept up in your arms.
Swept up in your arms.
I loved dancing with you.

I hoped we would dance a lifetime.

[PRASKOVYA takes her husband's hand and they begin to gently waltz.]

IVAN ILYCH:

Why did we stop dancing?

PRASKOVYA:

I don't know. *(wistfully)*

[IVAN ILYCH knees buckle suddenly, but PRASKOVYA keeps him from falling. She struggles to get her husband back on the edge of the bed. He is humiliated.]

IVAN ILYCH:

How did we become these people?

PRASKOVYA:

I don't know. *(she's now lost too.)*

IVAN ILYCH:

You must know I've been faithful.

Yet I betrayed my marriage.

I treated you with

indifference, contempt...

PRASKOVYA:

I treated you with

resentment, anger...

IVAN ILYCH / PRASKOVYA:

This marriage we created.

I was often left to wonder,

IVAN ILYCH:

As a father and a husband...

PRASKOVYA:

As a mother and a wife...

IVAN ILYCH / PRASKOVYA:

Is this all there is?

IVAN ILYCH:

Perhaps it's the wrong question.

IVAN ILYCH / PRASKOVYA:

Who I'm I? Is this it?

What I'm I? Is this it?

Why I am here?

Is this all there is?

PRASKOVYA: *(speaking)*

Ivan Ilych, I am scared.

IVAN ILYCH: *(speaking)*

I am too.

[They embrace and IVAN ILYCH unexpectedly cries on her shoulder.]

SCENE SEVEN: Am I not already dying?

Days have passed. IVAN ILYCH lies on his back, staring upwards. PRASKOVYA fusses. He's put out.

PRASKOVYA:

Please, Mon coeur.

Not without a confession.

Not without sacraments.

IVAN ILYCH:

You know how I feel about this.

PRASKOVYA:

Do this for me, Ivan Ilych.

[IVAN ILYCH relents. GERASIM exits quickly and returns with the PRIEST.]

PRIEST: *(with kindness)*

Good to see you again.

You have not been to church in some time.

[PRIEST turns his back to open his satchel. IVAN ILYCH shoots PRASKOVYA a look.]

PRIEST:

Still, it's not too late.

[PRIEST takes out a vial of oil, a cross, and prayer book. He then hands an icon to PRASKOVYA who places it on a side table with the others.]

PRIEST:

God's love heals and
redemption is open to all.

[PRIEST puts on a simple vestment and looks at PRASKOVYA who lingers.]

PRIEST:

Perhaps we can be alone.

PRASKOVYA:

Oh yes, of course.

[PRASKOVYA exits.]

PRIEST:

Let us begin with a confession.

IVAN ILYCH: *(with resentment)*

I confess I lead an unworthy life.

PRIEST:

This is not how we begin.

IVAN ILYCH:

My life has been false.

My life has been a lie.

PRIEST:

Confession is a sacrament.

Please stop, please stop.

IVAN ILYCH:

I lived, as I should have.

I lived the way I was told.

Everything correctly,

comme il faut

PRIEST:

That is not a sin!

IVAN ILYCH:

I lived for what was pleasant.
I lived for what was decorous.
I lived for everyone but myself.

IVAN ILYCH:

A life of falsehood.
A life of deceit.

PRIEST:

An honorable life is not a sin.
The wages of sin is death.

IVAN ILYCH:

Am I not already dying?!
Am I being punished?
Why must I be made to suffer?

PRIEST:

No, my son.
No, my son.
No one escapes life
without pain and suffering.
This is God's will.

Why must this be so?
Why should any of us
Need to suffer?

This is God's will.

IVAN ILYCH

Misery is God's will?

PRIEST:

Are you blaming God?

IVAN ILYCH:

I'm questioning him!

PRIEST:

Then you may not like his answer.

IVAN ILYCH:

I no longer NEED to believe in God.
I am damned and already in hell.

[THE PRIEST calmly places his belongings back in his satchel.]

PRIEST: *(with sincerity)*

You don't know the pain of hell.

IVAN ILYCH:
I'm beyond redemption.

PRIEST: *(with kindness and understanding.)*
That is not true.
Your heart must be open to God.

[IVAN ILYCH turns away.]

PRIEST:
I'll come back when you're ready to confess.

[The PRIEST waits for a response, there is none and then exits past PRASKOVYA who is surprised and confused by his quick departure. She walks back into the bedroom to find IVAN ILYCH looking much brighter.]

PRASKOVYA:
Did you confess?

IVAN ILYCH:
I did.

PRASKOVYA:
Do you feel better?

IVAN ILYCH: *(without irony)*
Immensely.

IVAN ILYCH:
I feel somehow renewed, hopeful.
A weight has been lifted.
I want a different life.
I want to live!
I want to live!
The hope that I might live!
I must get better!

PRASKOVYA:
A different life.
I want a different life.
I'm hopeful you will live.
I want you to get better!
You must get better!

IVAN ILYCH/ PRASKOVYA:
And be given another chance.
Let us hope and plan.
Let us have a different life.
A wonderful life,
A worthy life.
A better life together!

IVAN
Together.

[PRASKOVYA kisses her husband.]

PRASKOVYA:
Perhaps the operation.

IVAN ILYCH:
The one the doctor suggested.

PRASKOVYA:
Mon coeur!
I am so glad that the priest came!

IVAN ILYCH:
As am I.
As am I.

[They kiss and embrace.]

SCENE EIGHT: What shall I tell my husband?

[PRASKOVYA stands with the DOCTOR downstage in a pool of light on a darkened stage. He has his medical bag in hand. PRASKOVYA is beside herself.]

DOCTOR:
It was never his appendix.
An operation will do him no good.

PRASKOVYA:

There must be another cure.

DOCTOR:

I cannot diagnose his illness.

PRASKOVYA:

None of the doctors can!

First it was a floating kidney,
then blocked intestines.

Finally, cancer of the pancreas.

DOCTOR:

Nothing seems conclusive.

It's all very puzzling.

PRASKOVYA:

He's my husband!

He wants to live!

DOCTOR:

This is not unheard of.

Looking for hope at the end.

PRASKOVYA:

My husband is afraid of death!

DOCTOR:

No Madame.

He's afraid of dying.

It's the waiting.

It's the not knowing.

PRASKOVYA: *(spoken, pleading)*

You must save his life!

DOCTOR:

Doctors prolong life.

We make life better

If we treat the person
and not just the ailment.

Madame, you must understand.

Your husband is dying.

[PRASKOVYA is overwhelmed.]

DOCTOR:

It is only a matter of time.
We can ease his sufferings
with opium and morphine.

PRASKOVYA: *(begins to cry)*

What shall I tell my husband?

DOCTOR:

Madame, you must tell him the truth!

PRASKOVYA: *(spoken)*

No. I cannot.

DOCTOR:

Shall I talk to your husband?

PRASKOVYA:

I will find another doctor!
One that will listen to me.

DOCTOR:

I can refer others,
but they will tell you the same.
Death is irrefutable.

[PRASKOVYA breaks down in tears as she finally faces the truth of it.]

PRASKOVYA: *(breathlessly)*

I know.
I know...

[A musical finish and then a transition to give a sense of time passing.]

SCENE NINE: Are you still there?

[IVAN ILYCH wakes slowly in pain. There are now more Russian icons on the side table. GERASIM dozing at the foot of the bed with IVAN ILYCH's legs resting on his shoulders.]

IVAN ILYCH:

Who is there? *(spoken)*

GERASIM:

Gerasim, sir.

It's all right.

IVAN ILYCH:

No. Go away.

GERASIM:

I'll stay a bit longer.

I know this relieves the pain

IVAN ILYCH:

Go away.

[GERASIM puts his legs down.]

GERASIM:

Please, sir.

IVAN ILYCH:

The pain is more or less

But it never goes away.

It's hopeless.

GERASIM:

Sir...*(spoken)*

As long as there is life

There is hope.

As long as there is hope,

There is life.

[IVAN ILYCH is touched by his naïveté, but the sentiment is rejected.]

IVAN ILYCH:

You need your rest.

We both need to sleep.

Go to bed now.

GERASIM:

Rest well, Sir.

[GERASIM tucks IVAN ILYCH into bed. He tiptoes out of the bedroom but places a chair near the door. GERASIM sits down in a soft pool of light and waits faithfully for his master. IVAN ILYCH sits up to see if he is alone. He listens to any movement. He looks heavenward.]

IVAN ILYCH:

Are you still there?!

Are you still watching?!

Why have you done this?

Are you still there?!

Are you? Are you?!

Are you still watching?!

Why have you done this?

This life, this pain.

Pushed further and further down,

but never to the bottom.

If there is nothing.

Nothing? Nothing!

Then why life?

Of course, no answer! *(spoken bitterly)*

There is no meaning?

There is none.

Are you still there?

Are you still watching?

SECOND INTERLUDE: Lullaby

[The lights are slowly brought up to find IVAN ILYCH finally sleeping soundly.

PRASKOVYA sleeps in the chair beside the bed with an open book in her hand.

Everything is momentarily still. In his nightshirt, VLADIMIR enters and tip-toes past

GERASIM. He looks about the room and finds his mother. VLADIMIR then studies his

father. The boy is unable to understand fully what is happening, but feels he belongs here with his dying father and grieving mother. The boy then takes a throw from the bed, wraps himself in it and curls up at the foot of his father's bed. PRASKOVYA opens her eyes and sees her son. Soon it will only be the two of them. PRASKOVYA puts the book on the side table and opens her arms. VLADIMIR falls into them. She hugs and kisses him; she must be strong for both of them. PRASKOVYA begins to hum her boy a gentle lullaby. The boy puts his head in his mother's lap and soon they are asleep.]

SCENE TEN: Where is death?

[IVAN ILYCH stares at the ceiling, unaware of his surroundings. The DOCTOR checks his pulse and GERASIM watches from the door. PRASKOVYA with a tchotchke (a prayer rope) prays silently, while VLADIMIR looks on helplessly. The PRIEST signals for PRASKOVYA, GERASIM, and DOCTOR together.]

ALL:

Oh, God of spirit and flesh,
 Rest the souls of Thy departed, departed servants.
 A place of brightness and rest,
 where sickness and sorrow fled.
 Pardon every transgression,
 which they have committed,
 whether by word or thought or deed.
 For no one lives and does not sin.
 Thou art a good and merciful God.
 Grant rest to Thy servants
 who have fallen asleep.
 Death shall not die
 but death is not the end.
 There is always life.
 Lord have mercy
 Lord have mercy
 Amen

IVAN ILYCH: *(in breaths)*

Oh!

Oh!

DOCTOR: *(softly)*

Madam, it is time.

[PRIEST takes her hand and reassures her. They gather around the bed, but IVAN ILYCH looks at them all with no recognition.]

DOCTOR: (to VLADIMIR)
Time to say your farewell.

[PRASKOVYA reaches out to VLADIMIR. The boy is overwhelmed.]

VLADIMIR: (He cries out.)
Papa!

[IVAN ILYCH becomes lucid momentarily and recognizes his son and his surroundings. IVAN ILYCH reaches out his hand for his son.]

VLADIMIR: (spoken)
Papa!

[VLADIMIR runs to his father. IVAN ILYCH pulls the boy close and kisses him on the forehead. The boy weeps on his father's chest. PRASKOVYA sits on the other side of the bed and takes her husband's hand. A spot of bright white light begins to illuminate IVAN ILYCH. He looks at his wife and child.]

IVAN ILYCH: (breathlessly)
Sorry.
Forgive.
Forego.

[PRASKOVYA kisses his hand and holds it against her cheek, and to her heart. She openly weeps. IVAN ILYCH looks at this wife and points weakly to his son.]

IVAN ILYCH:
Take away.

[GERASIM steps forward to lead the devastated boy gently away. The white light grows brighter. IVAN ILYCH struggles to breathe. The spot continues to brighten.]

IVAN ILYCH: (spoken)
Where is death?
Where is it?
Where is it!?

[The spot brightens while all the other stage lights dim. GERASIM enters again and stands close, his eyes closed in prayer.]

IVAN ILYCH:

So, there it is!

There it is!

Light at the very bottom.

What a joy!

What a joy!

[While the spot becomes blinding white on IVAN ILYCH, lights darken on the ensemble.]

ALL:

God rest his soul.

IVAN ILYCH:

Joy! Joy! Joy!

ALL:

God rest his soul.

God rest his soul.

IVAN ILYCH:

Joy!

[They ALL cross themselves. IVAN ILYCH draws his last breath and sighs.]

MUSICAL FINALE: Beginning

[IVAN ILYCH finally relaxes, stretches out, and dies. A pause. Everyone is silent and still. A single sustained note from an oboe sweetens and then blooms into a beautiful solo. The white spot begins to slowly fade. Everyone remains in silhouette and long shadows. The oboe solo finishes on blackout.]

END OF OPERA