

RED STAR

By
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RED STAR

“The fall of the brightest of stars from the darkest of heavens”

On 12 April 1961 Yuri Gagarin, a hitherto unremarkable Russian pilot, returned from space and became the first truly international celebrity and super star. He was, however, a man ill-suited to fame and fortune. Manipulated by a political system desperate for advantage, and mobbed by a world desperate for a hero, he lost control of his own destiny with the same terrible consequences of a pilot losing control of his aircraft. This play compresses the story of his life, from that day in April until his death in a plane crash in 1968, and presents it as if it all occurs immediately after his return to earth as the world's first 'spaceman'. The events of this momentous achievement are relived to emphasise his failing control over a changed life, and as an examination of the phenomena of fame and celebrity in our own times.

Main characters

Yuri Gagarin	Russia's first Cosmonaut.
Valya Gagarina	Gagarin's wife.
Sergei Korolev	Chief Designer of Soviet rocketry.
Anna Rumanseyeva	A space control centre technician.

Other roles**

Nikita Khrushchev	First Secretary of the Soviet Union.
Nina Khrushcheva	Khrushchev's wife.
Lysenko, Tamara, Tatiana	Three Russian peasant farmers
US news reporter	
KGB news censor	

***Suggested doubling: If necessary, the roles of Nikita Khrushchev, the US reporter and Lysenko could be played by one actor. Nina Khrushcheva, and Tatiana or Tamara by another, and the KGB news censor and Tatiana or Tamara by a third.*

Setting

The play should be presented on a bare, open stage. Lighting could be used to focus attention on the part of the stage in which the action is taking place, and to separate the two areas of the reminiscence scenes reflecting on the space flight. Russian music might be used to locate the play at the beginning and at the end.

Running time: approximately 1 hour

Red Star was the winner, in the category for the shorter play, of the Radius Plays 2004 Competition.

Red Star

(Gagarin stands downstage, motionless. Valya stands to one side, facing off and away from Gagarin. The other characters stand or sit to the rear of the stage. Korolev and Anna move forward to stand either side of Gagarin, but speak as though he is not there.)

Korolev: Officially? It was a weather balloon. Or rather the package of instruments suspended beneath it. It smashed the canopy. There was nothing they could do.

Anna: The most famous pilot in the Soviet Union, our first cosmonaut, and there was nothing he could do?

Korolev: The canopy broke and he lost consciousness. *(Moves to the rear.)*

Anna: No. I've seen the crash site. This was no crash dive; the plane was level, and starting to climb. This was not a man unconscious of his fate. This was a man fighting to stay in control. *(Turns aside.)*

(Valya turns, storms up to Gagarin and slaps him hard across the face. Anna turns and moves to the rear.)

Valya: That's for not telling me.

Gagarin: I couldn't tell you, I didn't know. Nobody knew. They wouldn't tell me.

Valya: You knew, of course you knew. You've been practising for months.

Gagarin: We'd all been practising, six of us. I didn't know it would be me - I didn't know it would be today. It wouldn't matter if I did, they wouldn't let me tell you. If I had they'd have chosen someone else. It's what they're like, you know that. They have to be in control.

(The KGB news censor moves forward, seizes Gagarin's arm and moves him away.)

Censor: There are foreigners here, so you have to be careful. We've primed our own people with the questions we want you to answer, of course. But there will be others. Read this. *(A sheaf of typed notes.)* It's a description of what you saw and did.

Gagarin: I was there. I know what I saw and did.

Censor: Yes. *(Turning to Valya.)* And you will stand here. Beside, and slightly behind. You look pale. Put this on. *(A small powder compact of rouge.)* I'm pleased to see you haven't overdressed. *(Having positioned them to her satisfaction, she checks her watch.)* Ten seconds.

Valya: Are there no answers to questions for me?

Censor: There are no questions for you.

Valya: Then at least I can speak as I please.

Censor: Not if you wish to stand by your husband a second time.

(The US reporter moves forward.)

Censor: Incidentally, you've been promoted to Major. Try not to look surprised.

Reporter: *(Calling as if over a crowd, and signalling his wish to ask a question.)*
Major. Major Gagarin.

(The KGB censor looks around as if looking for someone else to ask a question, then grants permission to the insistent reporter.)

Reporter: I think first we'd like to congratulate you on your unique achievement.

Gagarin: Thank you.

Reporter: *(Having not heard the response clearly.)* Sorry?

Gagarin: I said, thank you.

Reporter: Right. A little nearer the microphone please, Major.

Gagarin: *(More clearly.)* Like this?

Reporter: That's fine.

Gagarin: I'm sorry this is new to me.

Reporter: Don't worry; you'll be getting plenty of practice. So Major, what was it like up there?

Gagarin: It's very strange you know, when you look about you and...

Reporter: What did you have for breakfast?

Gagarin: For breakfast?

Reporter: What did you wear in space? How do you go to the bathroom up there?

Gagarin: Well... like everyone else...

Reporter: Where does your wife do her shopping? *(To Valya.)* What do you cook for him when he comes home?

Gagarin: Wait, wait. Don't you want to know about the flight?

Reporter: The world doesn't want to know what you did, Major, they want to know about you.

Gagarin: I'm just a pilot.

Reporter: Just a pilot, yeah, sure. What do you drive? You have a favourite band? Would you vote Communist – if you could vote, that is?

Censor: No more questions. *(Closing down the interview.)*

Reporter: What about your medal?

Gagarin: Medal?

Censor: I said no more questions.

Reporter: Hero of the Soviet Union. What'll you have them engrave on your medal?

Censor: The interview is over.

Gagarin: Wait, I can answer that. Eleven thousand one hundred and seventy-four. That's how many people it took to put me up there.

Reporter: And to bring you back, of course.

Gagarin: No. Only one person brought me back. *(Places an arm around Valya.)*

Censor: Thank you, gentlemen. Major Gagarin will be resting now. This way if you please. *(Shows the reporter out. Both move to the rear.)*

Gagarin: They never asked me what it was like to be weightless.

Valya: Is that true?

Gagarin: No-one has ever been weightless before, and they never asked me what it was like.

Valya: That it was me that brought you back?

Gagarin: It was gravity that brought me back. It was you that made it worthwhile. And little Lena and Galya. How are they, when can I see them?

Valya: When your masters let you. But you would have come back, wouldn't you, - even without gravity, you wanted to come back.

Gagarin: You can't stay out in space, it's not possible.

Valya: But if it was...

Gagarin: It isn't. Unless something goes wrong.

Valya: Unless what goes wrong? Yuri, unless what? What goes wrong? Yuri...

Gagarin: Nothing went wrong, Valya. Nothing.

Valya: But if it did...

Gagarin: Hush, my Valya. There was nothing to worry about, nothing at all.

(Gagarin draws Valya to him and holds her head to his shoulder to comfort her. She is still, and has her back to the audience. Korolev and Anna speak as from the Baikonur space control centre to Gagarin in his Vostok capsule in orbit around the earth.)

Korolev: *(As over the radio.)* Hello, Yuri. This is Baikonur Central control. We're tracking you at twenty-eight thousand kilometres an hour. You're the fastest man alive and the first man in space.

Gagarin: *(As in his space capsule.)* Thanks to you, Chief Designer.

Korolev: How is everything?

Gagarin: Excellent. Everything functions normally. The window is small. If I look to this side, I can see the earth. I can see everything, you know. It is so beautiful.

Anna: He's crossing Africa, Chief Designer; it's time for us to bring him home.

Gagarin: Anna. Anna Rumanseyeva, is that you?

Anna: *(Looks to Korolev for permission, then speaks over the radio to Gagarin.)* Yes. It's me, Anna. How is the weightlessness?

Gagarin: It's nothing. I mean there is nothing. Nothing holding you. You're just free, you know, of everything. You feel you can go, do anything. Anything.

Anna: Well you don't need to. We're doing everything from here. We're in complete control.

Gagarin: That's what's missing, you know, I have no controls. If I could change the view, alter the pitch...

Anna: We have to hold you in the right position, to bring you home.