

The Dream of the Seed Collector

An Excerpt of the Play
By Keith A. Eckert

107 Penn Street
Ridley Park, PA 19078
(717) 609-5410
kaxeckert@gmail.com

CAST LIST

Vavilov, senior Soviet agricultural scientist
Khan, a local guide in Afghanistan

Interrogator 1 and 2, Soviet investigators and torturers
Lysenko, a rival Soviet agriculturalist

Mauria, a friend of Vavilov and Lysenko

Two or Three Female Dancers (optional)

TIME

1930-1945

SCENE LOCATIONS

Lecture Hall
Saratov Prison Interrogation Room
Pamir Mountains
Soviet Agriculture Institute

(Note: The play takes place in a Soviet interrogation room,
but Vavilov imagines the other locations.)

SET/SCENERY

At minimum, the play requires two old fashioned straight back chairs
and a 1940's-era desk.

The play also makes use of rear screen projection to help support the theme and establish basic
historical facts.

NOTES

The Music and Dance: The play contains several opportunities for music and dance, but it was
written in such a way that the director can use as little or as much as he or she likes.

SYNOPSIS

Amidst sleep deprivation, torture and relentless interrogations in Saratov prison, Vavilov, the Soviet Union's leading agriculturalist, begins losing a clear definition of reality and memory. During blackouts, he fancifully remembers scenes in his life.

The play opens with Vavilov imagining that he is making a presentation to a scientific conference; however Mauria, an ardent Communist Party member, continually interrupts his presentation until he gives up and begins dancing with her.

Vavilov is awakened by his interrogators who grill him on his alleged anti-Soviet activities. Vavilov strongly rejects doing any wrongdoing. Vavilov then slips into his memories of a trip to the Pamir Mountains, Afghanistan, where he met Khan. Mauria returns and takes Vavilov away.

Next, the interrogators talk to Lysenko, a rival agriculturalist with a vendetta against Vavilov. The discussion morphs into a scene in the past where Vavilov and Lysenko discuss their differences. After Lysenko leaves, Vavilov is taken into custody. Mauria returns for Vavilov, but he's gone.

The interrogators continue their questioning. Vavilov, visibly beaten, begins confessing to wrongdoing, but will not admit espionage. Angered by his uncooperativeness, the interrogators leave Vavilov, promising to return with more forceful methods. Mauria returns. Vavilov rejects her and she says he must die.

EXCERPT

SCENE 1

(Scene: Projected on the back screen are the words: 1936 International Biology Symposium. The stage has an old straight back chair center-upstage facing away from the audience. Upstage and to the one side is an old-fashioned office desk facing center stage. It also has a straight back chair. The stage is dark except for a spotlight center stage. Vavilov steps into the spotlight. While he speaks, Mauria enters – perhaps dancing – and sits down in a chair front of him.)

VAVILOV

Gentleman, distinguished scholars, fellow biologists:
Thank you for inviting me tonight
To ravel out the roots of human agriculture.
To do so we must travel back in time –
Ten thousand years, or maybe more –
A time when early man, a restive and
A hunter, literally put down roots
And altered history's roving vine.

Who first took seed to soil, took hoe to shoulder, and,
In patience yet unseen in humankind –
(Unknown in all the universe!)
Waited hungry weeks and months
For that blank stone to unfold its fruit?
Who was that man? That woman
Clutching at the promised ground?
Stabbing at the fecund flesh?
Who was it fed the millions that have followed? That,
We'll never know – their name was writ in dust
And swept upon the vanquishing winds of time.
But by their legacy we are sustained:
We reap what they have sown. We may not know
The who, but we can search the what:
From what crude plants were seeds first plucked and plowed?
From what strange weeds did wheat and barley
Evolve beneath our ancients' care and careful breeding?

MAURIA

(a light rises on Mauria, she yawns loudly and turns from Vavilov)

Aah, fiddle faddle!

VAVILOV

Huh? What? *(sees Mauria and smiles)* Ah, yes, I see! Where was I?
The answers, friends, my team and I uncovered –
And carried Soviet agriculture
And the socialist pennant to the forefront of discovery.

*(Mauria shows a bit more interest,
nodding her head. But as Vavilov
continues, she becomes more bored,
then becomes visibly agitated when he
mentions Mendel.)*

For by retracing our ancestors' steps,
Sizing our feet within their prints
And rediscovering the plants they used
We can develop new breeds –
Stronger, hardier, more productive, faster growing crops –
New breeds to sate the world's aching bellies
And flesh the walking skeletons of our times.
Yes, through the use of Mendel's genes,
We will manipulate the blueprints
Of these plants, the mortar and the brick
From which our modern crops were bred —

*(Mauria throws a wad of paper at
Vavilov. Vavilov responds good
naturedly.)*

What the—? You! Ha ha! Now let me be,
I'm trying to explain my research
To these distinguished guests.

MAURIA

Mendel, blend all, Vishnu who?
Flag leaf, clum node, spikelet, dew!

VAVILOV

Now, now! You've had your fun.

MAURIA

Come, talk about us: not about boring old genes and boring old Mendel!

(As Vavilov speaks, Mauria harrumphs and moans, forcing him to speed up his speech.)

VAVILOV

Not now, not now! This is important!
To leverage the genetic prov'nance of these plants,
My staff has systematically collected
Seeds from across the globe, the cultivated and the wild,
Traversing ice and boiling sands to make
Mankind's first living library: Yes, to make
The world's most comprehensive catalog of seeds!
From Asia Minor to Morocco, from Colombia
To China, Chili to Afghanistan,
We've collected more than twenty thousand specimens!

MAURIA

And Baikal Lake? Baikal Lake?

VAVILOV

Why yes, we went to Baikal Lake as well.

MAURIA

And what did you find there?

VAVILOV

Ah, Baikal Lake, the pearl of Siberia.
A treasure, yes. The lake's a mile deep
(The deepest in the world!) surrounded by
Hard mountains, tall; its immuring ruggedness
Makes it home to several thousand species
Unique in all the world — a lab for natural selection
And genetic evolution. Thus we went to find
Peculiar strains of rye and wheat,
To catalog their seeds —

MAURIA

Ugh, seeds! No more seeds! What else? What other stories did you learn there?

VAVILOV

Um, Baikal Lake – a region sometimes known
As Peristan, a magic place where nymphs
From the corner winds convene
To celebrate and dance.

MAURIA

(pleased with this direction of the conversation)

Dance, yes, dance!

(Music starts playing softly. Mauria stands, turns her chair to face the audience, then dances around Vavilov and affectionately strokes his arm while he, distractedly, tries to finish his story. The rear screen, meanwhile, shows a beautiful mountain lake and fields of flowers.)

VAVILOV

By the dusky fire's glow, the old men tell
Of a nymph in raiment white as snow
Who used her charms and simple spells
To help men fall in love (although
It's said the love she plied
Would often drive men mad.)

Across the capped peaks wisped and white,
Across the crystal valley lakes,
She skipped and fluttered free as light
Unknowing love's cruel twists and breaks
Until one day she met a man,
Until one day met her a man.

MAURIA

Come, come with me!

(Mauria takes Vavilov hand and leads him toward the chair.)

VAVILOV

Oh, I don't know. What about these -- *(gesturing to the audience)*

MAURIA

(stroking Vavilov's face)

No more talk!

VAVILOV

You are very beautiful!

*(Mauria kisses Vavilov and he swoons.
The music starts to fade out. The rear
screen goes black.)*

I'm feeling very heavy – I can't – I can't –

*(Vavilov slowly collapses next to the
chair. Mauria laughs and exits.)*

SCENE 2

(Scene: The stage lights expand to show the desk with two men, one standing next to it and the other seated and taking notes of everything spoken. Prison bars and a stone wall are projected on the rear screen.)

INTERROGATOR 1

Vavilov! What's all this nonsense? Prisoner Vavilov! Get up!
What do you say? You waste our time with silly talk of nymphs!

VAVILOV

(getting up weakly and sitting on the chair)
What? Oh, I'm sorry. I must have – I haven't slept three days – I thought I was – If just – I just had some sleep I could answer your questions –

INTERROGATOR 1

You'll answer our questions then you'll sleep. But you don't answer our questions, do you? You tell us about seeds! Always seeds!

VAVILOV

I'm doing the best I can – I don't understand –

INTERROGATOR 2

Listen Prisoner Vavilov: We ask questions and you answer them.
That's all you need to understand.

VAVILOV

I will, I will.

INTERROGATOR 1

You are charged with being part of an anti-Soviet wreckage organization and a spy for a foreign intelligence service. Do you admit your guilt?

VAVILOV

(becoming more alert, energetic)

That's untrue! I've always worked honestly for benefit of my homeland and the Soviet state.

INTERROGATOR 1

You're lying! We have evidence – sworn statements!

VAVILOV

What evidence?

INTERROGATOR 2

That's confidential.

VAVILOV

Then how am I to defend myself?

INTERROGATOR 2

With the truth!

VAVILOV

You want the truth? You want the facts? Just look at the richness of my seed collection – it has no equal in the world! It is the envy of all biologists!

INTERROGATOR 2

And what do you have to show for this library?

VAVILOV

Well, it takes time to breed seeds. Granted, we've haven't had any large-scale successes so far, but some of our small experiments –

INTERROGATOR 1

Augh! I'm full of that – no more! I don't want to hear it. *(short pause)* It appears you like to travel a lot, Prisoner Vavilov. Why is that? Did you stop loving Mother Russia?

VAVILOV

I never have!

INTERROGATOR 2

You never loved Mother Russia?

VAVILOV

No, no! I have never stopped loving my country.

INTERROGATOR 1

But you seem to have taken every opportunity to leave our great nation and play with the bourgeois.

VAVILOV

Yes – I mean no! I was studying the origins and varieties of plants in order to create stronger, more productive crop varieties.

INTERROGATOR 1

Stronger varieties of what crops?

VAVILOV

The natural crops of Russia – barley, wheat and rye.

INTERROGATOR 2

So, you're saying Soviet crops are not as good as other nation's crops?

VAVILOV

(frustrated by the stupidity of the question – he starts to show his weariness again)

Yes – but no – I mean – I'm very tired. If you would let me sleep I could explain this all much better.

INTERROGATOR 2

Answers first, sleep second. Are Soviet crops inferior to other nations? What's wrong with Communist crops? Aren't they as good as capitalists' crops?

VAVILOV

There's nothing wrong with Russian crops, but, uh, uh, plants know no borders – like communism. They spread and grow everywhere.

INTERROGATOR 1

Uh huh.

VAVILOV

But, by finding the places where they originated and their related plants, we can build stronger varieties. Just like communism.

INTERROGATOR 1

Mexico, Afghanistan, England, the United States, Brazil, China – you're quite the world traveler.

VAVILOV

I have traveled wherever I thought I could find seeds – compiling a library of plants and seeds that will help eliminate famine.

INTERROGATOR 2

Prisoner Vavilov, you want to end famine, yet while you have been collecting this so-called library for 20 years, our people starve! Maybe your work is misguided, maybe you are intentionally sabotaging our great nation's efforts to feed its people!

VAVILOV

No! It takes time – generations – to breed new plants.

INTERROGATOR 1

New plants? What's that mean? These plants have always existed. They can't be created. Rather, they must be trained to be stronger, Prisoner Vavilov. They must learn – like our citizens – to achieve perfection.

VAVILOV

But plants don't work that way. They are the result of millions of years of evolution and gradual change over time. Their genes –

INTERROGATOR 2

Lies, Prisoner Vavilov! Lies! To say it is their genes is to imprison mankind in his body and cut off any hope of perfection! What are we then but our genes? What is our life then but pre-ordained? No! Comrade Stalin has said so himself.

VAVILOV

(exhausted)

With all due respect to Comrade Stalin ...

INTERROGATOR 1

(eager to hear what Vavilov says next)

Yes?

VAVILOV

By gathering varieties of plants, we are able to breed new ones that may be stronger and more productive. Like -- uh, like we do farm animals. My trips simply try to gather as many of these -- as many of these as possible. Seeds, that is. Gathering seeds. No one knows which plant -- which, uh, genes --

INTERROGATOR 1

These trips -- what did you do on them?

VAVILOV

As -- as I said, we were looking for new plant varieties. In Peru and, uh, in Bolivia our expeditions discovered twelve new species of uh, uh, wild potatoes.

INTERROGATOR 1

That all sounds rather pointless.

VAVILOV

(increasingly weary)

I assure you it was -- we were -- many of the places we had to go to were quite inhospitable. We were looking for high altitude plants ... shorter, uh, summers ... grow --

INTERROGATOR 2

(speaking over Vavilov)

You're not making any sense!

VAVILOV

Uh -- grow strong and fast, uh, uh, over a short summer season.

INTERROGATOR 2

Tell us about your travels in the Pamir Mountains. That region is restricted to travelers. No one else is allowed there, but you were given access. How was that? What did you want there?

VAVILOV

The Pamir Mountains? Uh ... Ah, yes. *(laughs lightly)* We traveled there because – because we thought their 14,000 foot peaks – towers of icy sky – might have stronger, um, uh, varieties of – of wheat that, uh, grow quickly ... strongly ... feed more people – beautiful mountains

INTERROGATOR 1

Does anything grow at that – Vavilov ... Vavilov! Vavilov!

(As Interrogator 1 speaks the above lines, both interrogators go dark and Vavilov suddenly awakes and begins speaking his next lines. A picture of high, forbidding mountain peaks are projected on the rear screen.)