

Dear Jess, dear friends from the George MacDonald Society,

My name is Olga Lukmanova, I live and work in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia, and have been a fan and translator of George MacDonald's work into Russian for almost two decades now. Earlier this year I was delighted and humbled to learn that our 2015 production of the original musical "The Light Princess" in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia, received the first prize of the GMD Society's Annual Competition for best original art, music or writing inspired by the work of George MacDonald. A little later, I was even more delighted and humbled to learn that we could direct the \$2,500 prize towards scholarships for kids from low income families to attend this year's Christian Creative Youth Camp "Malakhit" and to participate in the production of our new musical, 'Princess Olga,' about the 10th century ruler of Old Russia (or Kievan Rus') who converted from paganism to Christianity, sought to bring Christ to her country, and was the grandmother of Prince Vladimir who ended up baptizing Russia and converting its people to Christianity.

The camp and the production were a huge success, and on behalf of all the staff, volunteer leaders, and participants I want to extend our heart-felt thanks for awarding us this prize and for allowing us to use it for this purpose. It meant the world to us to receive this award for "The Light Princess" and to be able to put it to such excellent use, with so much good fruit. Thank you! I wish you had been there in the audience when after the performance we all took a deep bow of thanks, trying to express our gratitude to those who helped us with the project. Well.... I am sure you can use your imagination. Imagine fifty-five teenagers and a team of about a dozen excited volunteers and staff members all bowing down to you and saying thank you. Thank you.

I want to tell you a little about the Malakhit project and how it relates to George MacDonald, and why it is especially significant for me, as someone who translates MacDonald's work into Russian and seeks to popularize his thought everywhere, that last year's and this year's projects came together so well.



"The Messiah" (Judah's song)

The idea of writing and putting together a play (or, to be more precise, a musical) during the week of youth summer camp in Nizhny Novgorod goes back to 2002. I am not sure what the original inspiration was, but when I joined the project in 2004, as the writer of the book and lyrics and the director of the musical "Esther," my main incentive was the desire to tell a good – and transformational! – story and to tell it well. It was an additional thrill to tell a *Bible* story, making it come alive for the kids and the audience in unexpected and powerful ways.

Since then, we have produced eleven original musicals (in 2007 we put on Andrew Lloyd Webber's 'Joseph and His Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat'), most of them based on the Bible: 'Isaac and Rebecca' (2005), 'The Messiah' (2008), "Abraham and Sarah' (2009), 'Jacob' (2010), 'Jonah' (2011), '2012' (2012) (the story of Noah's flood told from the perspective of Noah's wife who came to see a therapist: we decided we couldn't ignore the predictions of the end of the world) and 'David' (2014). In some instances we took our characters to the 21st century (sending Abraham and Sarah to a Russian village in the middle of nowhere and having her kidnapped in the Cairo airport), in others stayed within the time frame of the Biblical narrative, only



"2012" (Animals in Noah's ark)

adding hip-hop (yes, way before “Hamilton” - ;), modern rhythms, and Russian cultural references.



“The Light Princess” (“Can I see you tomorrow?”)

videos (and find the audio recordings) of all our musicals on the website we recently launched: <http://mlht.su/myuzikly/> Granted, it is all in Russian, and so far we have made English subtitles only for our last two musicals, but, hey, I could always make a special effort if any of you are interested in seeing any of them. Just give me a shout.

Until 2015, the project was sponsored by a Christian organization based in Switzerland, so the staff and volunteer leaders didn’t have to pay to participate, and kids got scholarships to attend when they could not pay the full fee. However, last spring, the sponsor unexpectedly pulled out, and for a while it didn’t look like the project would even happen: we weren’t prepared financially or logistically to run the project on our own. But then a team of enthusiasts and long-term staff and attendees decided that we simply had to finish what we had started, and pulled everything together, coming up with an entirely new program and pulling together what funds we could find. We are still amazed and utterly thankful when we remember last year’s camp and production: it all came together so beautifully, the team worked in such unity and joy, and the musical ... it all was truly a piece of the Grand Cosmic Fairy Tale that we are so fond of telling.

So, when it came time to decide whether we were going to continue, everyone’s answer was a resounding “Yes!” – it was too good a project to abandon just because of financial difficulties. It meant a year of praying, planning, saving, and looking for supporters, which proved to be a serious challenge for our faith. So when they heard about the prize for “The Light Princess,” we were overjoyed, as it provided about a third of our whole budget and meant that many kids who otherwise would not have come, would be able to attend.

Many others also gave: some people offered to pay for one kid to attend, others graciously provided discounts on transportation and rent, and yet others gave small sums very sacrificially (very much like the widow with two coins), expressing their support and blessing in every way they could. Over the years they had seen the good fruit of the project and wanted to make sure it happened again.



Kids and volunteers writing thank you letters

During the camp, we told the participants this story of giving and sacrifice, showing them pictures of those who had given money towards the project. Yes, we also told them about George MacDonald and the GMD Society; you should have heard the cheers! The kids were so touched by it all, that some of them had tears in their eyes. We asked them to write personal letters to those who had made the project possible, and I am attaching a selection of those letters for you to see (translation is provided).



Around the campfire

Besides working on the musical, during the five days of camp the kids do sports, play games, make funny videos, study the Bible (the Book of Daniel this year), watch and discuss films (“The Lord of the Flies”), put on impromptu performances (a good friend from Scotland once called them “mad Russian cabarets”), talk, reflect and pray in small groups, attend workshops and mini-seminars (this year there was a scrapbooking workshop and two training seminars about romantic relationships) – and just hang out, laughing and singing together, around the campfire and everywhere else. Incidentally, for some of the teens (especially from broken homes) it is a rare

opportunity to be with peers in a safe and carefree environment, and we relish every opportunity we have to provide the experience for such children.

Of course, there are also rehearsals: two 2-hour rehearsals a day – although those who are especially enthusiastic (mainly, dancers and lead actors) practice every free minute they can find. Each time in the beginning it seems completely impossible: how does one put together a major performance in only five days, with young teenagers, many of whom have never been on the stage, have never performed for large audiences, and often do not know how to sing, dance or act? And yet, by God’s grace, somehow it all comes together in the end. As Philip Henslowe from “Shakespeare in Love” said, “I don’t know how. It is a mystery!”



In rehearsal

Putting together and performing a musical is obviously a huge part of the project, but we always stress that the musical is only an instrument towards bigger purposes. It is these bigger purposes that make the project so dear to our hearts and so worth working for. And I think these bigger purposes are something that George MacDonal would embrace heartily, as these are exactly the things he strove for in his own life and writing.

First of all, the whole project and the musical as its integral part gives us a chance to do something truly good and significant together, exercising our faith and growing in Christ in the process. As someone wise said, the only way to get to know yourself,



Dancers resting

others and God is to do something together. Each year, from start to finish, the camp is a major exercise of faith, a process of discipleship and of consciously putting into practice what we believe. To quote Dorothy L. Sayers, the only Christian work is good work well done, and in every aspect of the project we seek to convey this to the kids and practice it ourselves. We now have several generations of Malakhit alumni who have grown up to be wonderful men and women of faith. Some of them have come back to the project as staff or volunteer leaders and some are hoping that Malakhit will last long enough for them to send their kids there as well. They say they know that it will be a quality program, because Malakhit is big on quality.

For those kids who are interested and/or engaged in creative arts “Malakhit” is a chance to participate in a project that enables them to express themselves in song, dance, and acting in a safe and supporting environment, without a long-term commitment to a company or a ministry but with long-lasting results.

The project is also a great opportunity for the kids (and often adults) to discover their latent talents and try themselves at something they had never tried before. There are stories I can tell you about boys and girls who made their first stumbling steps on the stage in one of our productions and went on to be professional actors, dancers, and choreographers.

One of my favorite stories is that of Sergei, who has been with us for nine years. I remember him as Peter in “The Messiah,” awkward and barely able to enunciate his (very few) words. With every new project he kept learning, growing, and developing his talents, until he became a wonderful dancer and professional choreographer. This year he made his debut as the main choreographer of “Princess Olga” and did a fantastic job, not only choreographing the scenes but also training several young apprentices.



Sergei as Peter (2008)

For it is yet another one of our goals: to get the kids as involved in creating the show as we can, from coming up with ideas to writing the lyrics, making costumes, trying their hand at directing and choreography, etc. They will not all become professional performers, directors or writers, but we all learn a lot in the process, and usually there are many talents discovered, supported, developed and put to use as we go along.

“Malakhit” is a Christian camp, but generally 30 – 50% of participants come from unchurched backgrounds and either don’t know what they believe or expressly state that they do not believe in Christ. One of our long-time volunteers (and my fellow faculty member at the Linguistics University of Nizhny Novgorod) has said that even though he is a non-believer yet he loves this project and this camp, because the team’s faith is obvious and compelling, but no one is pressured to believe blindly or to accept ready answers without thinking. On the contrary, teens are encouraged to engage with the Bible creatively, both as a text and as a living story, to draw their own conclusions and to learn their own lessons. Needless to say, we view this project as evangelistic, both in engaging non-Christian teens in the Bible and involving them in a Christian community, and in presenting Biblical truths in our performances to very diverse audiences.

Again, there are scores of stories about teens who became Christians in the camp or as the result of participating in Malakhit, but one of the more recent ones has a romantic side to it. In 2013, that same Sergei who I told you about before, met a beautiful and talented dancer Katya and invited her to attend Malakhit, literally three days before it began. She came and loved it, and continued spending time with Sergei and other believers, which ended in, first, her becoming a lovely and passionate Christian and, second, in her becoming Sergei’s dancing/ choreographing partner and then, three months ago, his wife. She starred in “The Light Princess” last year and was the best Light Princess we could have imagined.



Sergei preparing for rehearsal (2016)



Sergei (on the left) in “Princess Olga”



Sergei and Katya in “Princess Olga”

Finally, as I have said before, Malakhit is a wonderful chance to tell a good story and tell it well, hoping and praying that it would affect genuine transformation in individuals – and through them in the whole culture and the whole world. As George MacDonald firmly believed in the power of a true story – with ‘a red spot’ of depth somewhere in there – so we believe that good stories engage people’s minds, hearts, and deepest-seated intuitions in a very unique and powerful manner, transcending propositional assent and penetrating into regions of psyche where reason and logic may not always have access.

Along with GMD, we believe that true stories are all reflections and parts of God’s Grand Story, the True Myth – in fact, last year we spend our mornings at camp reflecting on ‘magic fairy tales’ and how they, in their way, tell the True Fairy Tale, where heroes begin with a perfect world that becomes broken from disobedience, go on a journey through the woods of death and initiation, receive magic gifts that only believers can use, encounter difficult tasks of faith and battles with serpents and dragons, sometimes die and rise again, and, finally, end up at the wedding feast, marrying the beautiful princess. And we echo MacDonald’s thought and practice when we tell the story through theater, with music, dance, and lively dialog – just as he and his family used to, when they performed Shakespeare, “Pilgrim’s Progress” and other plays, and as they arranged concerts for workers and poor people, convinced that people need nourishment for their hearts and imaginations as well as for their bodies.



Princess Olga’s prayer

We performed “Princess Olga” on July 9 and 10, only three times, in a small village, at a recreation resort, and on the stage of a local culture center, where the kids’ parents and friends could see it. The response has been overwhelmingly positive, and in some of the comments the musical has been called “prophetic,” “stunningly relevant,” “genuinely evangelistic, in a good way.” We are very happy and very proud to have been a part of this. Personally I am especially glad that we were able to look back at the history of our country together and use it for serious reflection on its present and future, including our own part in shaping its destiny. Now that Russia is engaged in the conflict with Ukraine, a musical about the time when Russia’s

capital was in Kiev and our two countries shared one life and one story, is particularly poignant.

One of the most common responses to “Princess Olga” has been that it is too good and too significant to show only once or twice, that it should be made available to more live audiences. We are not yet sure what it means and how to proceed, but we will definitely be talking about this as we gather in late August to discuss this year’s project and make potential plans for the future. For now, we have the video of the big performance, and I have the privilege to share it with you all by providing English subtitles. Granted, the English text is not rhymed, and not all the poetic words and images have been rendered in full, but it is faithfully done and I trust you will be able to enjoy the show. One word of advice: it may be helpful if you read a little about who Olga was (at least the Wikipedia page). Anyway, just like “Hamilton,” it will definitely be a history lesson.

In conclusion, I want to thank you all again for making such a significant contribution to the lives of our teens, to our production, to the continuing story of my country – and, I think, to the salvation of at least one of my university students. She signed up for the project last minute and at the end of the camp told me that Malakhit had turned her life around and Jesus was “the missing piece of the puzzle” that neither education, nor psychology, nor all the fun in the world could provide. I hope and pray that she indeed has begun her journey with God – and look forward to more stories.

In Christ, with all gratitude,

Olga Lukmanova (on behalf of the Malakhit team)

In the photo: Sergei Tikhomirov (composer, sound director), Olga Lukmanova (writer, director), Katya Esen (project administrator)

