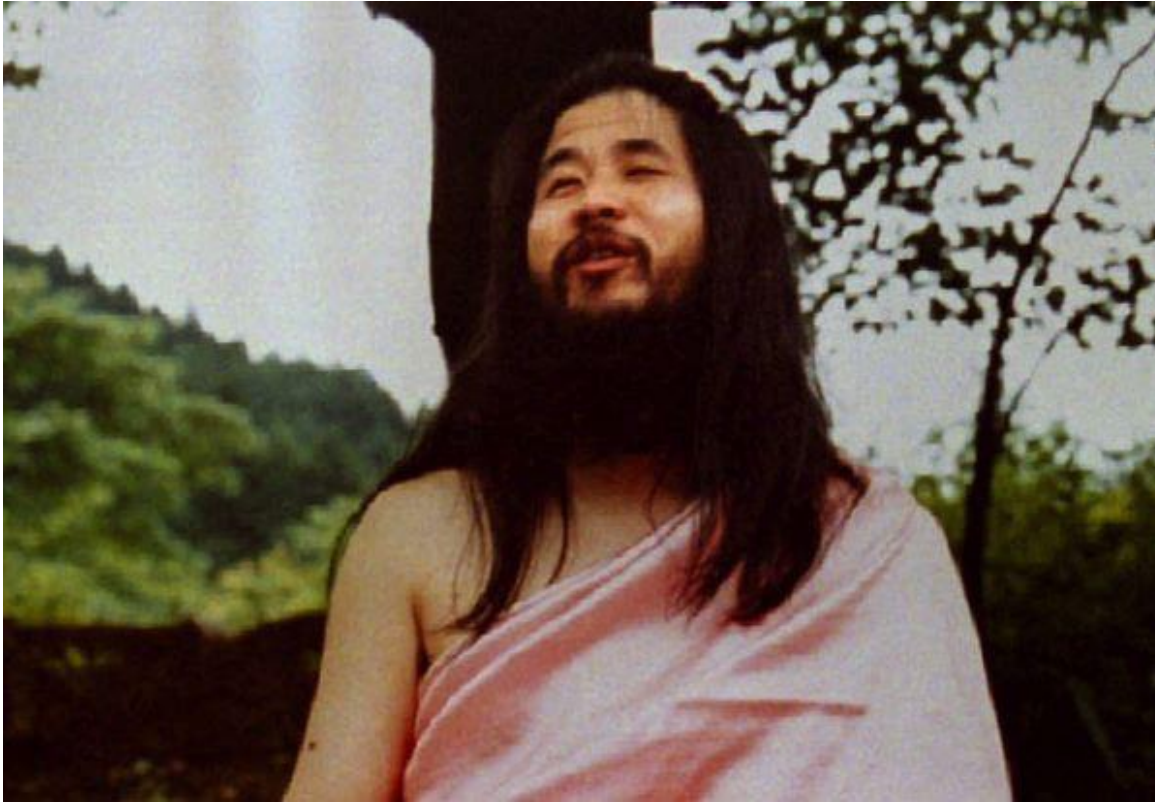


FOLLOWING A BLIND GOD

A Ten Minute Play

By Evan Spreen



Characters:

MARINA: (20's-30's) A Russian survivor of Aum Shinrikyo. Shaved head. Disaffected Moscow University student turned cult initiate.

SHOKO: (40's-60's) Japanese prophet. Leader of the Aum Shinrikyo cult. Self proclaimed Messiah and embodiment of Christ. Blind since early childhood. He walks very slowly and with effort.

(Lights rise slowly on a stage draped in long white sheets hung from the ceiling that sway softly. MARINA kneels center. She is partially obscured by the sheer fabric around her. She is dressed in the attire of a monk. Her monk's robe is orange like a prisoner. Her head is shaved.)

MARINA

I like to think that God died many years ago. This comforts me. Maybe in the 1970's. No, maybe earlier. Perhaps God died on the 20th of January, 1918 in Russia. The year isn't all that important; or maybe it is, sometimes a specific date can make things seem more... real... Maybe God died peacefully. Some minor complication. A blocked artery. Some minor defect of the heart. Or maybe Nietzsche bored him to death.(beat) His funeral was small and inelegant. Most people forgot to show up. But I like to imagine that my great grandmother was there. My immovable stone-faced soviet Grandmother would be very cross with God for dying and leaving so much unfinished business. But she would still attend his funeral because that's simply what you do.

When one God dies. Another rises. Later, we would call the period after the fall of communism the "Rush hour of the Gods" in our country. So many faiths suddenly coming to Russia gave people new and attractive alternatives to the old ways.(beat) It's really only a matter of time. You see, In the absence of god, there will always come others. Either you find them. Or they will find you. You will fall to your knees or you will tremble in fear. Either way, it is ultimately your choice how you take it. With a shrug? With anger? Violence? Rejection? Me? I embraced him with my entire self. I packed up what little I had and I went to him. I embraced him. I said do what you will with me. I give

you my body. My mind. My soul. I am yours. Бог. Мой
 Бог. I give myself to you. And now I truly wish I
 hadn't.

(SHOKO ASAHARA, a bearded Japanese man
 wearing loose fitting silk stands
 barefoot behind her and slowly walks
 through the white sheets. He is blind,
 he doesn't speak to MARINA directly.)

SHOKO

代替は何もない (There is no alternative)
 あなたが必要です。(You are needed)
 あなたは私を強くする。(You make me strong)
 あなたがいないとただ捨てられた盲人。(Without you I am just a lost
 blind man)

MARINA

Aum Shinrikyo.

SHOKO

オウム真理教。(Aum Shinrikyo)

MARINA

ВЫСШАЯ ИСТИНА. Supreme truth. That is what they
 promised.

SHOKO

I will teach you. I will teach you how to fly.

MARINA

I had just turned 18. I was a Student at the Moscow
 University, around 1993. I saw him speak. The Russian
 government invited him. From the moment he came on
 stage it was very clear that he was blind. And yet he
 saw so much that the rest of us could not. My grades
 had dropped shortly before this. I had lost sight of my
 own education. University just kept stretching out and
 feeling like it would never end for me. I had three to
 four years ahead of me at the least... and I was in a

relationship with a man who... was... not good for me.
(beat) I'm trying to justify why I joined. I'm trying
to make all of this less of my fault. But I joined. Of
my own volition. I believed.

SHOKO

ロシアのみな様、招待されたありがとうございます。よろしくお願いします
(Thank you everyone in Russia for your invitation. It
is nice to meet you all)

MARINA

From the moment he set foot on that stage at my
university...

SHOKO

My name is Asahara Shoko. I am here to tell you my
truth.

MARINA

...I believed it all.

SHOKO

My EEG record shows that my brain waves have a
frequency below 0.05 hertz. Doctors say that it is an
inconceivable phenomenon that I am alive and talking to
you today. They say that I should be dead. But this is
the state in which the primary projection of the
deepest level of consciousness manifests in this world
most accurately. In other words, I have the cleanest
mirror. This state is described in Buddhist texts as
"the state of a Buddha who has attained mirror-like
wisdom...." I am leading a regular life deeper than
what is normally considered deep sleep. This sense of
calm is only found in Buddhas.

MARINA

He backed up his claims with science. He presented his
supernatural powers in such a way that was reinforced
with sound and convincing logic. There had always been
this tenuous connection between the Russian mind and
Buddhism. The Russian mind has always danced upon the
precipice of nihilism. Buddhist practices refine this

nihilism as divine "nothingness". This gives it meaning. Which in itself seems almost contradictory. But, Aum Shinrikyo weaponized our nihilism. Without us even realizing.

SHOKO

I will teach you to see the future.

MARINA

In the next week Shoko Asahara returned to Tokyo and I went to the Aum Shinrikyo headquarters in Moscow. I was hooked. I had to sell quite a few of my things to pay for the classes. They charged Muscovites more than anyone else.

SHOKO

I will teach you how to enter the fourth dimension.

MARINA

A man named Mikhail ran the meetings. At a place they called a "Satyam" from the Sanskrit word for truth. I asked him why we were charged more. He said it was because we were outsiders and should be grateful to even have the opportunity to study under Asahara. Who had gone to great effort to bring his practices to our country.

SHOKO

I will teach you how to read people's minds.

MARINA

I wasn't sure what to expect. I was a little nervous at first. But then, we all sat on the floor and stretched. It was just yoga. We watched a cartoon. What they called an anime. It showed Shoko flying through the sky like a bird.

(Aum Shinrikyo anime opening is
projected onto one of the sheets.)

SHOKO

I will teach you how to speak to god.

MARINA

I felt good there. I felt good for the first time in what seemed like a very long time. (beat) I was broken before then. Before I went to that meeting, I had been with a man who had broken my spirit. I hadn't even realized how deep the wounds had gone until I was free of them. It was/

SHOKO

/I will teach you-//

MARINA

(to SHOKO)

//YOU ARE THE GOD OF POISON!

SHOKO

(softly)

I am the supreme enlightened one. I am Christ.

MARINA

And here I was with a new man. Another man. During the initiation ritual I drank this man's blood. The blood cost 500,000 rubles. About 8,000 dollars. I truly sold everything I owned to pay for his blood and a lock of his hair and a vial of his semen which I rubbed on my body in order to absorb his spirit and create a link between us. I pledged to become one of his monks. His Shukkesha. I sat and promised myself to him over and over in so many mantras I will never be able to purge from my head."I am happy to join Aum. I will always follow the guru. I will become a monk."

(SHOKO exits and returns with a bowl of porridge.)

MARINA

I sold what little remained of my possessions and moved in to the Satyam in July 1993. It felt like a new start.

(SHOKO places the bowl before her.)

MARINA

We received only two three hour breaks from our studies to sleep each day. There was a ritual called "sacrificing food to the guru".

(She begins to eat the porridge. SHOKO gazes out blindly, reverently.)

MARINA

We had to eat until we felt sick.

(Each bite she takes is torture. She is eating as if she cannot stand anymore.)

MARINA

This was to make us understand that food caused pain.

(Long beat as she continues to eat. It becomes unbearable. She is visibly nauseated.)

MARINA

I tried so hard not to throw up.

(She takes another painful bite.)

MARINA

I couldn't throw up.

(Another bite)

MARINA

If we threw up they would make us eat it.

(Another bite)

MARINA

They would make us eat our own vomit.

(MARINA finishes, still in pain and hands the empty bowl back to SHOKO. He takes it off stage. He returns and hands her pills and water.)

MARINA

After eating I always felt sleepy and had vivid dreams. But then they just gave us the drugs outright, not even bothering to mix them into the food anymore. They called them "Sattva vitamins". One everyday. Afterward, I'd feel so lethargic. I couldn't think... I didn't want to think.

(SHOKO sits calmly next to her.)

SHOKO

You are on the path to enlightenment.

MARINA

Shut the fuck up. You aren't really here.

(They sit silent for a moment.)

MARINA

Just about everyone was suffering from some kind of neurosis. We started beating each other. The men lived separately and weren't allowed to touch us. But we did just fine beating each other without them. Turns out we don't even need men for that! We can do it ourselves!

(SHOKO begins a mantra of "Om". Long and sustained.)

MARINA

We all became very sick. Nobody was in control of themselves anymore. I began to smell strange chemical odors all throughout the building. My throat ached and my eyes watered. I finally started making plans to escape.

(SHOKO's mantra continues.)

MARINA

I wasn't the first. A man. A few years younger. Who lived across from me. I didn't know his name. I never got his name. We just called each other Shukkesha. He escaped, but it was short-lived. He couldn't re-adjust. He was out, but he was still inside somehow. (beat) It was so horrible to find out he was dead and not know

his name. It was as if he died without one. He hung himself from a tree branch in a park near the Satyam.

(SHOKO stands and claps his hands once.
A noose appears from the ceiling.
Swaying between the white sheets.)

MARINA

Then the boy. He was only thirteen. He jumped from the balcony of a Moscow apartment after the other children taunted him for his lack of spiritual progress. He wanted to leave, but he couldn't get his mother to come with him. He plummeted sixteen floors to his death.

(SHOKO claps again. Marina stands.)

MARINA

I got out.

(MARINA walks to him. He is about to clap for a third time, but pauses.)

MARINA

You aren't the Buddha. You aren't Christ. You aren't enlightened. You are just another man. A MAN. Just another sickly man who stands on the backs of others. So many lie prostrate beneath you and rise you up.
(beat) You don't see me at all! I REJECT YOU!

(There is a very long beat where they stand opposite of each other. She meets his blind gaze with fiery intensity. Finally, SHOKO softly turns around and exits. MARINA collapses to the ground and sobs.)

MARINA

I was out. But others weren't so lucky. It destroyed their lives. (beat) I went to the tree in the park. After I learned his name. It was Sasha. I went to the tree. I laid beneath it.

(She lays down. She curls into a ball.

She remains there for a while.)

MARINA

I went to the balcony. His name was Lyosha.

(She gazes up. Long beat. She stares with great sorrow as if looking at the balcony.)

MARINA

Some part of myself had died too. It took many years before I stopped hearing his voice within me.

(SHOKO's voice is heard. It reverberates through the space.)

SHOKO (offstage)

Living in society means that we absorb much of its negative karma and impulses which causes us great suffering not only in life, but in death as well. I will replace the old. I will replace the government. There will be harmony. I have seen the end. I have seen doomsday. It is inevitable. I must hasten it to lessen the suffering-

MARINA

STOP!

(MARINA holds her head in agony.)

MARINA

Then I found out what they had done. What they had been doing the entire time. I found out the Russian members outnumbered the Japanese by 20,000. 50,000 members throughout Russia. Oh god. It was too much. Around the time they recruited me they had released a cloud of Anthrax over Tokyo. This was unsuccessful. They killed some birds. That was it.

(Several doves drop from the ceiling and

land around her. SFX: Bird sounds.)

MARINA

But they didn't stop. They murdered a man in Tokyo for wanting to leave. They murdered a reporter who took a stand against them. They murdered his wife and child and left their bodies in a dumpster.

(MARINA looks around as if seeing this people amongst the sheets. SFX: Japanese speech. Rising slowly in volume. People arguing.)

MARINA

They extorted people for medical treatment. They kept an assassination list that included many high profile rival buddhists including Soka Gakkai of the Institute for Research of Human Happiness. Buddhists assassinating Buddhists.

(SFX: Sheep)

MARINA

They tested Sarin Gas on sheep in Australia. They sought to develop weapons there using Russian scientists.

(SFX: A van parking and then idling.)

MARINA

They killed eight people and injured five hundred when a parked refrigeration van in Matsumoto released Sarin gas. They were not held responsible. Five were murdered with gas in targeted personal attacks. A brother of a man who escaped was taken in the night and he was disposed of in a microwave incinerator.

(SFX: Low hum.)

MARINA

His last words were "If I disappear, I was abducted by Aum Shinrikyo". The cult was finally raided in 1995 in Tokyo, but it was too late. The biggest attack was yet

to come.

(SFX: We hear the sounds of a train approaching. We hear the sounds of the Tokyo metro. We hear the announcement that the train is arriving to Shibuya station bound for Harajuku on the Yamanote line.)

(SHOKO enters and drops a small backpack on the stage. He bows deeply. The backpack begins to hiss softly.)

MARINA

I was a part of this movement.

(SFX: We hear the bustle of people entering a train. A few scattered coughs.)

MARINA

I felt naive. I felt responsible. I felt conned. Conned by a new Rasputin. I could finally see Shoko for what he truly was. What he had always been. Blind.

(SFX: The coughing intensifies. Both male and female screams. Sirens. Prayers in Japanese. People sobbing. A baby crying. A woman comforting the baby in Japanese. More screams. Then silence.)

MARINA

The Aum Shinrikyo cult renamed itself following the Tokyo Subway Sarin gas attack in 1995 which killed 13 and poisoned nearly 6,000. They rebranded as Aleph. Membership dropped in Russia, but I think even one follower is too many. The cult wasn't made illegal in Russia until 2016. Shoko Asahara was finally executed in 2018. He was hung at the end of a rope until he died. New Years 2018 a young man drove a truck into a crowded street in Tokyo in protest Asahara's execution. Which is proof that this cult still exists. It is very

much alive. Why won't you die?

SHOKO

The world is broken. Can you deny this? I aim to replace it. It will be born anew. All you have to do is follow.

MARINA

There is a danger in following someone who cannot be wrong. There is a danger in following those who exclude. There is a danger in wrongly placed faith. There is a danger in following a blind god.

(SHOKO exits leaving the backpack on stage. MARINA waits for him to exit and then exits the opposite direction.)

BLACKOUT

END PLAY



NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY:

This Analytical play serves to identify aspects of Messianism in Terrorism and the landscape of Russian religion and inherent Nihilism following the fall of Communism which made cults appealing to average Russian citizens in the mid 90's. These concepts: Russian Messianism and its comparison to mainstream Religious Messianism, the characteristic of ethical nihilism as a component of the leadership of a terrorist group and the subsequent dissemination of terroristic ideology, The nihilistic similarity of Russian literature and thought processes to the teachings of Buddhism and concepts of "nothingness". These are all concepts I gleaned from my studies on Russian terrorism and how it affects the world at large. This play seeks to illustrate to the audience a very specific time in the Russian consciousness where mass indoctrination into a cult was possible. This play asks why Russia waited until 2016 to identify Aum Shinrikyo as a dangerous cult. This play serves as a warning that extends to many cults and churches with dangerous and mind-altering rhetoric that are still operating and are respected and denoted within their respective governments as "Religious Organizations".

I used the following articles for my research:

There wasn't enough information strictly from news articles, so I used some research papers as well. The first is a scholarly paper which describes the Aum Shinrikyo's recruitment in Russia and its impact. It is told from a mostly neutral viewpoint. The author's intention is to understand. Therefore this article is more descriptive than it is prescriptive. This article is where I took the character of Marina and her story.

The Farce of the "Great Russian Salvation Tour:" The Legacy of Aum Shinrikyo in Mother Russia by Daniel A. Metraux

Japanese Studies Review, Vol. VII (2003), pp. 48-66

<https://asian.fiu.edu/projects-and-grants/japan-studies-review/journal-archive/2003.pdf>

The next article is a very short BBC headline about the crackdown on the cult in 2016. It is written from a perspective which shows the cult as deadly without seeking to understand or even describe the rhetoric behind the cult. Only in the briefest terms does it mention what the cult stood for. The perspective is "world news journalism" identifying this cult as a negative and very dangerous movement.

**Aum Shinrikyo: The Japanese cult behind the Tokyo Sarin attack
Published 6 July 2018**

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35975069>

Finally a Russian article, which aptly names the cult a "Doomsday Cult" and speaks about their negative impact in Russia. This article is written from the Russian perspective. It shows the real daily-life effect this cult had on Russian citizens and seeks to identify the current state of the cult in Russia.

WHY HAS AUM SHINRIKYO BEEN BANNED IN RUSSIA ONLY NOW?

Yekaterina Sinelschikova

Russia Beyond the Headlines

4 октября 2016 г.

<https://pravoslavie.ru/97561.html>

Also included is a link to episode 1 of the Aum Shinrikyo anime, which is featured in this play for a moment. It was created in the 1980's in Japan to serve as propaganda for the cult.

Aum Shinrikyo Anime (Chouetsu Sekai - Episode 1: Levitation)

[English subtitles]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yO_ewrEc820