



A Study Guide

THE NIGHT WITCHES

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By Rachel Bublitz
Directed by
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MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT

Rachel Bublitz is an award winning and internationally produced playwright known for telling stories about women, and creating exciting new work for young performers. She received the prestigious Will Glickman Award for the best premiere play in the San Francisco Bay Area for her full-length *Ripped* produced at Z Space. In 2015 she was recognized as the top emerging female playwright in the Bay Area, receiving the June Anne Baker Prize. Her work has been produced at theaters and schools across the country, as well as Canada and England. She's been commissioned by the Egyptian YouTheatre (*Cheerleaders VS. Aliens*, *The Night Witches*, and *The Summer I Howled*) and PlayGround (*Mommy Dances With The Devil*). Her full-length *Burst* was selected for MACH 33, a festival of new science plays at the Pasadena Playhouse.



Her ten-minute play *My Body* was selected for the 45th Annual Samuel French Off Off Broadway Short Play Festival. Her plays have been published with Dramatic Publishing, Stage Partners, YouthPLAYS, and Pioneer Drama Service where she was awarded the Shuebert Fendrich Memorial Playwriting Contest. Rachel now resides in Salt Lake City, Utah, where she's worked with Salt Lake Acting Company and is a member of The Lab at Plan-B Theatre. She's a member of the Dramatists Guild of America, and she graduated from San Francisco State University with a Masters in Creative Writing and a Masters of Fine Arts in Playwriting. When she's not writing, she bakes pies for her family; her vastly supportive husband, Alex, and her two viking-like children, Audrey and Jonah, who never shy away from giving their mom career advice.

For more visit: RachelBublitz.com.

A WORLD PREMIERE??

The Night Witches was first commissioned by the Egyptian YouTheatre in 2019 as a one act. This production was reprised at the Great Salt Lake Fringe Festival. The full length version was intended to premiere through the Egyptian YouTheatre in March of 2020, but the production was cancelled due to COVID-19, making the fall 2020 production at the University of Utah the world premiere of the full length *The Night Witches*!

BACK TO THE BASICS

Who?

The "Night Witches"

Soviet women aged 17-26

All economic and class backgrounds – some from rural communities, some students at universities (mostly Engineering/STEM fields)

Became the 586th, 587th, 588th Air Regiments – fighter pilots for World War II. Specifically our play is about the 588th Air Regiment – the ONLY all-female regiment in military history and the most highly decorated unit in the Soviet Air Force during WWII

What?

A night bombing regiment, they would fly 5-10 raids throughout the night, bombing German troops and armaments to keep them awake and ruin their supplies. They would fly in pairs – one navigator, one pilot per plane. Each plane was stocked with 6 bombs. Due to the lightweight planes, there was not enough room even for parachutes or radios. The planes, however, were incredibly hard to shoot down, frustrating many German soldiers

Where?

The Eastern Front (see Glossary) – specifically the Taman peninsula

When?

Our play takes place in July 1943. The Night Witches were first deployed in October of 1941, 5 months after the USSR entered WWII following the German Invasion – Operation Barbarossa. They flew over 23,000 sorties between 1941 and Victory in Europe day (May 8, 1945).

Why?

National pride

Wanting to be equal to men and earn true citizenship

How?

When the USSR entered the war, many young women wanted to fight on the frontlines. They sent letters and showed up at conscription offices to petition the government to let them fight. In part thanks to Marina Raskova, a female pilot working for the army, Stalin created three regiments for the women to join. They compressed their training into 6 months, working 12-17 hour days, logging hundreds of flight hours.

FUN FACTS

- The women were given men's uniforms – even down to the underwear! Some of the women would alter their clothes to fit, even using the too big underwear to embroider.
- Many found retaining their femininity very important – using their navigation pencils as lip liner and painting flowers on the front of their planes
- Most of the women slept only a few hours each night (2-3)
- There was an unofficial standard of retraining within the Night Witches unit that began when pilots would teach their navigators to fly to keep them from getting bored. Soon, mechanics would be retrained as navigators, navigators as pilots, etc. which allowed the unit to stay all-female as they rarely had to bring in new recruits or replace soldiers within the unit.
- A few of the women had flight training prior to the war as several communist youth unions had public flight schools used to engage young people in military affairs.
- The women would compete every night to be the first team to fly – flying first meant they would get to fly an extra mission or two. Male units mocked them for this practice as it meant they were exposed to danger more often, but the Night Witches were eager for as many chances as possible to fly for their country.
- There were many rumors among German troops about these women – one being that the Soviet Union had given them pills to give them "cat vision" allowing them to see at night.

GLOSSARY

Bravery takes
cities!
Courage
overcomes all
obstacles

Hero of the Soviet Union
The highest honor of the Soviet Union, used to distinguish hero status over Order of Lenin est. in 1934 and came with monetary privileges. 21 of the Night Witches were awarded this very prestigious honor.

Eastern Front

Stretch between Black Sea and Baltic Sea, USSR/Poland/Allies vs. European Axis, known to Russians as "The Great Patriotic War" - "largest military confrontation in history" - 4 years of brutal, vicious warfare (1941-1945)

Kukuruznik

Nickname for Russian Po-2 - came from Russian word "Kukuruza" meaning "maize" - i.e. roughly translates to "crop duster"

Po-2

A Polikarpov Po-2 were the type of planes flown by the Night Witches. These biplanes (two wings) made out of canvas and wood were ideal for training because of their uncomplicated design. They were cheap and lightweight, but very slow.

Gains of October

Refers to the second phase of the 1917 Russian Revolution in which Nicholas the II was forced to abdicate as the last Tsar of Russia. In October the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government that had been put in place in February after the abdication and took control of the country. This is when Lenin came to power. Revolutionary unrest had been brewing in Russia since ~1904. Nicholas II was executed in 1919 by the Bolsheviks.

Motherland

Russia is usually personified as a woman and has been since the medieval period. Motherland Calls is a huge WWII memorial that has extreme significance to the Russian people

Sortie

a mission or attack by a single plane



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the pros and cons to an all-female regiment? How could this be helpful for military success and survival?
2. How would their wartime service have affected the Night Witches when they came home from the war? What kind of changes happened to the role of women in the post-war period?
3. Women in the U.S. also fought in WWII. How are the Night Witches similar to those women? How are they different?
4. The Night Witches were willing to put themselves at extreme risk to protect their country. What are some modern day examples (besides the military) of people doing the same? What qualities do you see in these people?
5. How do the Night Witches reflect the changing objectives, strategies, and tactics of World War II?
6. Is vulnerability important in a good leader? Can you think of an example from *The Night Witches*?
7. What do you do when you have to do something scary? What makes you feel brave? Where in *The Night Witches* do you see someone being afraid and brave at the same time?
8. What is the difference between the leadership of a country and the country itself? Can you support one without supporting the other?
9. What gives you more comfort: memories of the past or dreams for the future? Why?

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