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MY SPECTATOR

## Diary

TOM HOLLANDER

29 OCTOBER 2011



Last week I travelled to New York for an audition. And before you ask, I haven't heard yet. On the flight I sat next to a [retired](#) Hollywood producer from Santa Barbara. She would have been travelling upper class but today, owing to some kind of tier point issue, she had been downgraded to premium economy. Like your entire country, I joked. She talked about the end of the American empire and the inexorable rise of the east. Welcome, I said. Let me embrace you and gather you into the club lounge of second-rate nations. Allow me to ease your sense of shame. Have a drink. We can sit here and bitch about the inferior service and the terrible food.

...

At Ground Zero I walked the narrow streets still haunted by that shocking insult, that shroud of dust clouds. People walk fast with New York urgency but they are subdued. And right there next to the [building site](#) I noticed an old church called St Paul's Chapel. Opened in 1766, it is Manhattan's oldest public building in continuous use, the sign says, a place where George Washington worshipped. There is a graveyard in front. And you can imagine fields and cattle, bonnets and buggies. What things it has witnessed, this old chapel. What life and what death. New York is still the most glamorous city I've ever been to but it's starting to feel older. The sirens still wail, the paths in Central Park still pulsate with joggers. The Manhattan schist still trembles beneath your feet. But weirdly it's starting to feel, dare I say it, a bit quaint. New York? Quaint? Perhaps it's the fear that far away there is a gigantic new place called Shanghai, which dwarfs all others.

...

Or should I say it hobbits all others. That seems the appropriate franchise to reference here. China, like Mordor, belches and roars in the east and its shadow stretches towards us, consuming the old world. I was one of the first actors in London to be seen for Frodo ten years ago. I didn't get it, obviously. The right size, but too handsome apparently. Last year I was one of the last actors to be seen for Bilbo Baggins, when it looked as if Martin Freeman wouldn't be released from Watson. Again, I was a good size for it, but once more, too symmetrical facially. That's what my agent said, anyway.

...

After New York, for reasons too preposterous to go into, I found myself in Ukraine at a team-building conference for Russian bank managers. We were staying in an out-of-season resort in the Crimea. There were a lot of tired-looking bodyguards there. Big men in leather jackets. Sunken-eyed, watchful. I sensed they didn't consider me dangerous.

...

We drank a lot of neat vodka at lunchtime and ate some Tartar meat dumplings with cream and dill. Having read on Wikipedia the night before that Stalin had cleansed the peninsula of its indigenous peoples, I asked our host if there were any actual Tartars left in the Crimea. Certainly, he said, a few had been struggling back from Siberia. Really, I asked and what do they look like? There are some in the kitchen, he said, and ordered two to be brought out. Two

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nervous chefs were presented, and I attempted to thank them for their labour-intensive dumplings. Having no Tartar, no Ukranian and no Russian, this was a challenge. 'Placeba,' I attempted, and gestured at my plate. It felt like a eugenic parlour game. Not as bad as burning someone out of their [home](#) and forcibly marching them to a gulag, but still quite embarrassing. They looked at the floor before being shuffled back to the kitchen. Having initiated this unfortunate encounter, I kept quiet for the rest of the day. I had flown through 13 time zones in 24 hours and was almost speechless with jetlag and daytime vodka. This, combined with my ignorance of languages and banking systems, meant that as the bankers partied, I crept gratefully to bed, unnoticed by all. By all except the bodyguards, who judged me an inebriated, freeloading irrelevance.

...

Until the next morning when, atoning for my drunkenness, I forcibly marched myself through the gardens, down some rusting steps onto the windy deserted beach, and splashed into the Black Sea. It was cold and grey and quite rough, but the shock of it kickstarted some deep neurological functions and I felt much better. Salt-water ECT. As I strode back through the gardens a group of three guards nodded and grunted their approval. The sheer Putinesque machismo of my late October dip in Y-fronts was apparently worthy of acknowledgement. 'Splacebo,' I said, proudly.

*Tom Hollander stars in Rev, which returns to BBC2 next month.*

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