

*The prequel*

## Cupid by the Rampe Torch

*The story is based on the memoirs of Musya's old friend, a theater make-up artist, Soviet-repressed Mathilda Amilakhvari; with additional notes and comments from her kin. The memoirs are written during the Perestroika years.*

Young actors are trying their best for the honor of playing the role of young Stalin. If the play is successful they are promised fame and praise from the highest rank party officials. This might get them closer to comrade Stalin himself, and to Cinema roles. Indeed, why should Russians play the great leader when his compatriots look more alike and are likely to understand him better?!

The plot is set in 1937 - the year of the great cleanse. Soviet art serves the party with agitprop poems, stories, novels, plays, and screenplays about Stalin. The artistic works are widely discussed.

Shalva Dadiani's play *From the Spark* is set on stage all around the Soviet Union. The play tells the ideologized story of Stalin leading workers' rallies in Batumi at the beginning of the century. The plays are set in all Tbilisi theaters, as well as amateur stages: plant clubs, provinces, and nomadic theater casts.

The infamous pioneer leftist-Bolshevik woman Musya Eristavi-Retinger, whom and Stalin go way back and are connected with youthful sentiments (once she even used their home in Kutaisi as a hideout), now is one of the leaders of the Soviet cultural-propagandistic establishment. While visiting an amateur theater show of *From the Spark* in one of the western Georgian villages, she becomes awed by a young man playing Stalin on the stage. His name is Gerasime Sakhamberidze.

Once she gets back to Tbilisi, Musya starts agitating for Gerasime as the best person for playing Stalin. She manages to get an audition for him before the Republic Committee. The committee finds Gerasime's acting skills astonishing, which gives a green light to Musya for trying to move the actor to the main theaters of Tbilisi. As a result, Gerasime replaces a young star in the role of Stalin in Academic Theater, causing a backlash of intrigues in the theater. Following these events, the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs begins a series of secret questioning, imprisonments, and the disappearance of the theater cast and crew. Meanwhile, other theaters are losing audiences, as everyone wants to see Gerasime in the play. This goes on simultaneously with mass repressions, Moscow processes, and shoots.

Musya falls for Gerasime and gets entangled in a very public adultere. Being a person of easy nature, Gerasime totally obeys Musya. She becomes a subject of citywide gossip.

Musya's husband, another old revolutionary, despite the long preceding alienation between him and his wife, angrily moves to his workplace and starts spending nights in the office. The happening is so unsettling for the party officials, that the leader of the republic Lavrenti Beria begins to investigate the case. In the meantime, Gerasime's young wife comes to Tbilisi with a child in her arms and protests in front of the theater.

Despite everything, Musya has no intention of quitting. She commissions a screenplay about young Stalin to the cinema writer Zhorzhika Makharoblidze. She organizes a photo shoot for Gerasime as young Stalin and connects with famous Moscowian directors and producers, with the aim to fund their screenplay with a state budget and help Gerasime appear on the Unionwide screen. Musya understands that none of this will work without Stalin's help. Reminiscing about their meeting in Tbilisi the previous year, she prepares to go to Moscow. Musya talks to Gerasime a lot about her and Stalin's times together in their youth, trying to help him get into character. The more she tells, the more these memories seem erotically charged.

Suddenly Gerasime disappears and Musya loses his track. A meeting with Lavrenti Beria unveils a tragic thing that happened to the young man because of Musya. Beria explains that if not for their affair, it would all work out. This makes Musya think that Stalin still has romantic feelings for her.