Take Wing with the 'Night Witches”

- **By Allison Brophy Champion**
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The mostly forgotten true story of female Soviet pilots who bombed Nazis during World War II arrives on stage this weekend in an airplane hangar on a Culpeper County farm.

Local woman Elena Kritter, 26, joined forces with six other New York City-based actresses to write, produce, direct and star in “Night Witches,” an experimental theater piece about the heroic aviators of the Night Bomber Regiment. She first learned of their war role in the 2013 New York Times obituary for Nadezhda Popova, one of thousands of Russian farm girls who volunteered to fight the Third Reich.

“The Nazis called them ‘Night Witches’ because the whooshing noise their plywood and canvas airplanes made reminded the Germans of the sound of a witch’s broomstick,” according to the obituary for Popova, who died in Moscow at age 91.

“Almost every time we had to sail through a wall of enemy fire,” she said in an interview for David Stahel’s book, “Operation Typhoon: Hitler’s March on Moscow.”

Popova was one of the first volunteers who flew 852 missions herself.

The story of female strength and flight was a perfect fit for Kritter, who grew up the daughter of a crop duster on the Culpeper farm. She’s been flying since she was a baby.

“My parents were skydivers,” Kritter said during a recent rehearsal. “It’s so much of my life, so much of my world.”

Her world since her teens years has also been on the stage.

Kritter graduated in 2008 from an honors program at Rappahannock County High School and in 2012 from an honors program at Lynchburg College, where she was active in the dramatic arts.

She recently spent two years acting in Italy with a touring troupe and completed a two-year training program at New York City’s William Esper Studio learning stage combat, among other things.

Late last year, Kritter, who lives in Manhattan, was chosen from among hundreds of other women to play the title role in “Victoria Woodhull,” about another historic woman, the first to

run for president in 1872, nearly 50 years before female Americans won the right to vote. That play premiered Nov. 17 at the Theater for the New City, one of New York City's leading Off-Off-Broadway venues.

"I'm drawn to wild feminine in all the women I play. I love playing the athlete, the explorer, the fighter, the protector, the spirit-seeker, the leader, the enthusiast; the essential heroine. From Saint Joan to Annie Sullivan, I want to tell the stories of people in ordinary circumstances who do extraordinary things," says her introduction at **elenakritter.com**.

Her latest project certainly follows that theme.

"I remember thinking this is the most amazing thing I never heard of," Kritter said. "This story was too big, too epic to try to do alone. I had to have more people involved."

Late last year, she issued a casting call seeking a group of "actor/creators" to develop "Night Witches" as part of a month-long artistic residency on her family farm in Culpeper. Forty auditioned in February and seven were cast, including herself, to portray the Soviet aviators. "They were the first all-female regiment in the USSR to receive guard status. They were considered an elite unit like the Navy Seals," Kritter said.

But it was more than that, she added. It was a sisterhood.

The most decorated unit was the night watch that would whoosh in by cover of darkness bombing the Nazis from their flimsy planes, formerly used for crop dusting and outfitted as fighters.

The fact that the historic women used old crop dusting planes and her father is a crop duster pilot is not lost on Kritter. "Night Witches" will be performed in his hanger at Ground Rush Farm at 20634 Mount Pony Rd. at 7 p.m. Saturday, Sunday, Monday and Tuesday. Tickets are free.

During a recent rehearsal, excitement was high in the large space even as heavy rain thundered on the metal roof. The cast of seven women was on site and ready to talk about the process of creating the play in about three weeks. Kritter chose to premiere in her hometown because of the ready resources.

"We could not find a place like this for free in New York City," she said. "And most of these women were farm girls who had a great love for their country. That resonates here in Virginia."

Kritter's dad, Gene, in addition, helped build set pieces and with lighting for the show. He also put the cast in contact with resources at Culpeper Regional Airport.

They got their costumes—Russian uniforms from World War II—from Slindy's New & Used Treasures on U.S. 29. The real Night Witches wore hand-me-down uniforms from male pilots and flew without parachutes, guns, radio or radar, only maps and compasses.

The women participated in 30,000 missions over four years, dumping more than 23,000 tons of bombs on the German invaders, according to the New York Times.

Josephine Cooper, 22, of Boston, Massachusetts is co-directing with Kritter in addition to acting in various roles like all of the other players. She remembered hearing Kritter talking about creating a play about the Night Witches while dining in Sicily.

"I kept moving my chair closer and closer to hear what she was saying," Cooper said. "I was just enamored with the idea that this story could be a piece of theater."

Stories of female bravery get lost to history all the time, she said.

"There was just an inherent theatricality about it," Cooper said.

Actress Maggie Ronck, 33, had not heard of the Night Witches prior to the casting call. She was immediately interested in being part of the play.

"I have an obsession with the 1940s," she said. "My grandfather and grandmother were in the Marines during World War II and she was always a huge inspiration."

Actress Alida Rose Delaney, 25, said it was refreshing to see all women writing, directing, producing and acting in a story about women. "Night Witches" highlights female strength but also femininity, she said.

Delaney had never before flown prior to going up with Kritter's father, who transported the cast to the Military Aviation Museum in Virginia Beach for research.

"It was important for me to face my fear," Delaney said. "I could not do this show without being in the air at least once."

Actress Elizabeth Chahin, 28, of the Dominican Republic, left her island country to audition for a role in "Night Witches." Her best friend is Russian, but she, like most of the other actresses, had never heard the forgotten aviation story.

"There are so many messages to take from this piece, and not just by women—it's for all ages," Chahin said, adding, "The deeds of these women should not be forgotten in history"

Actress Madeline Barr, 23, was attracted to the project for its feminine side.

“I am sick of sugarcoating myself, dumbing myself down to fit into a world by a man,” she said. “I am sick of playing parts that don’t match my intelligence or strength. We always play the girlfriend, the wife or the daughter—you are always belonging to a man.”

Another “magnetic force” for Barr was the ability to be immersed in the creative process every day for a month in the country.

“It’s so nice to feel everything slow down and to breathe fresh air that doesn’t smell like garbage,” said the New York City resident.

Actress Alexis Ingram got involved with “Night Witches” to be part of an ensemble production and to give voice to a forgotten people.

“We all look so different and come from such different backgrounds,” she said. “If this was on Broadway, we might have not been chosen for these roles.”

About 40 percent of the script developed by the young female collaborators is based on actual accounts from the real Night Witches as recounted in Anne Noggle’s 2001 book, “A Dance with Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II.” Dramaturge Max Sklar advised on the play during production.

“We wanted to be as true to history as possible,” Kritter said. “But we also wanted to pay respect to and honor all these women and girls for their bravery.”

“Night Witches” will be presented in two acts with one intermission. The play, with its 24 scenes, runs around 90 minutes. The production will simulate flying through physical theatre, acro-yoga, shadow puppetry and interaction with props.

It’s a universal story, Cooper said.

“We are these women’s age. That could have been us,” she said, adding, “This play needs to continue. Culpeper is only the beginning.”

To reserve seats, RSVP at **nightwitchestickets@gmail.com**.

Allison Brophy Champion can be reached at **abrophy@starexponent.com** or (540) 825-4315.

Experimental theater in Culpeper

What: “The Night Witches,” an original ensemble play based on the true story of the all female Soviet 46th Guards Night Bomber Regiment of World War II

When: 7 p.m. on April 29, April 30, May 1 and May 2

Where: Ground Rush Farm Hangar, 20634 Mount Pony Rd. in Culpeper

Admission is free, but seating is limited. RSVP nightwitchestickets@gmail.com to reserve tickets.