Interview with Maria Ignatieva

July 3, 2020

SPEAKERS
Dr. Maria Ignatieva, Hannah Stoll

Hannah Stoll 00:02
The following interview was conducted with Dr. Maria Ignatieva on behalf of The Ohio State University for the Knowledge Bank and the Voices of Women Oral History project. It took place on Friday, July 3rd, 2020 via Zoom Video Communications. The interviewer is Hannah Stoll.

Hannah Stoll 00:19
Hello, Dr. Ignatieva. How are you?

Dr. Ignatieva 00:21
Hello, Hannah, I'm fine. How are you doing?

Hannah Stoll 00:23
Good. Tell me about why you decided to enter higher education and then later teach and work in the same environment.

Dr. Ignatieva 00:37
I think it was very natural for me. I was always a very good student in high school. And I didn't have any doubts about the necessity to enter higher education and then to get a terminal degree after the master's degree. So it's not even something that I was thinking about to do it or not, I just knew that it's the way it should be.

Hannah Stoll 01:14
What were your first impressions of your college experience? And how did being a woman affect your experience?

Dr. Ignatieva 01:21
That's, I think, something that I needed to explain a little bit, because I got my Master's and PhD in Russia. So it is a different kind of experience than it is here. To start with, the master's degree was embedded in bachelor degree and master's degrees were together. We studied six days a week, not five, and every month of June, that was also internship. So it was very aggressive studies, and again, they were very different because my specialization was in all kinds of art field and theatre field. And so, it was, I would say that my institution was similar to Julliard and the conservatory education, except for the theory which would take two extra years. So when I came to the Ohio State, it was very different because a) it was American education and b) it's the university, which is a liberal arts college.

Hannah Stoll 02:54
Please describe the positions you've held or roles you've had at Ohio State Lima and in what units and over what time period?

Dr. Ignatieva 03:05
This is a very good question, Hannah, especially from the female perspective, because I came here, basically, with my then-husband, who was a playwright in residence at The Ohio State Lima Department of Theatre. So I just came with him and with our little girl, so I started looking for jobs for me. The only thing that I knew that, since so many years have been spent on my degree – so it's five years to get a master's degree and another four years and a half, almost five to get a PhD – so I was sure that there will be possibility for me to find something that, in this country, that I can be useful with what I already know.

So, the first job I was offered was to direct a show with Ohio State, it was on a part-time basis. But that was incredibly important for me because a) I met the students. I met the fantastic, even then, although the stage was two times as narrow, and as it is now, and small but still the professional capacities of our Department of Theatre, it was striking. So when I directed the show, my husband translated the play, and it was incredible act of liberation and finding myself, so he told me that I could. We'd been working in the United States, so it was kind of the first glimmer of hope, because I was very depressed indeed, because it was not my initiative to come to the States. So the second, very important part, was that I realized that now since actually since I was ten, or eleven, I was always working with kids doing the theatre workshops. And I realized that there was an interest in it, and I started leading the workshops at Ohio State Lima. And again, it was so interesting and the response was great, and kids– so there were different age groups, some of them, seven to nine, the other with the elder, your teenagers, we did the playwriting workshops. And again, it was the second step towards my future position. So then, Joe Brandesky, you probably remember him, Professor Brandesky and I, we created the international exhibit, which offered the design of Boris Anisfeld, which was opened in St. Petersburg in Russia. And we took the tour from the Ohio State Lima to Russia that was led by the dean. And it was a big group of people who came for the exhibit to St. Petersburg. Then this exhibit opened in Lima and in Columbus, then it traveled to Lawrence, Kansas. So and that was even, again, more closer to the full position at Ohio State. And so from 1994 to 1995, I was a visiting assistant professor. From ‘95 to ‘99, I was the department program coordinator. So it included my teaching. I also initiated the children’s theatre program that started to call Theater for Young Audiences. I started to direct and write for this program, so it was all coming together. So since ‘99, I'm a tenure track and in 2017 I became a full professor. So that was from nothing. So step by step. So to where I am right now.

Hannah Stoll 07:32
Tell me about your experiences with the OSU Lima theatre department, and how did you feel when you first arrived compared to today?

Dr. Ignatieva 07:47
We have to remember that it's– so a few days ago, my daughter celebrated her thirtieth birthday, and she came here at the age of two. So in this twenty-eight-year period, a lot of things changed in Lima.

Now I'm going to start first, that I was kind of hurt for several years in the ‘90s. Because wherever I went, I was asked where I am from. So, and if you come to a new country before the age of eighteen, the accent is going to vanish, but I came at the age of thirty. So an accent, it's going to be with me forever.

And in the ‘90s, the foreigners, the people who came from other countries in Lima, were kind of exotic. More so than it is now, indeed. So it was the ‘90s, I remember that my friend who came to visit me, she and I, we got lost in Lima country roads, around Lima and we asked the farmer how to get back to Lima. There were no phones, no GPS yet. So, and the farmer said, where are you chicks from? And I said, we're from Russia. My friend Katya and I, we both are from Russia. He said, ha ha ha, nice joke. You are some German chicks here. But I mean, it was I say it was ‘94, you know, so it was totally strange idea for many people. And then I was really very upset. And so I started working on different answers. So because the next thing, since Russia is kind of a popular topic with the Cold War, which just was over and it's far from here. So I realized that if I say that I'm not from Russia but somewhere else, the questions are different. Once I said, I'm from China, and they were very surprised but they didn't ask me anything else. Once I said, I'm from Lithuania, they said, oh, okay. So and because Russia especially was something that people will go on and on, how did you come here? And I know that they all meant well, I know that. I know that they were very friendly. But if you are asked like five times a day, wherever you go– so that was one thing. How did campus differ? Again, there were a fewer foreign faculty in the ‘90s and again, since we're dealing with the students who are very often come from the farms and they do not have– I had some kind of occasionally, hostility, not from the faculty, but from the students. You know, oh this Russian, oh this Russian all this. So that kind of was, oh, I'm not going to be in the production with this Russian. So this is kind of a sensitive topic. I do not know if you have classes with Irina Boyadzhiev?

Hannah Stoll 11:41
I don't think I have.

Dr. Ignatieva 11:42
Math and computer? Well, she's from Bulgaria. So they would say– they would confuse us. When Irina was pregnant, the whole class started looking at my belly, and because someone in the library on the computer said that "pregnant Russian," because the difference between Bulgarian and Russian was not so specific. So and for about, like three months, I was looking like this pregnant Russian who's belly didn't grow anywhere. So, and I'm sure that you are familiar with our favorite expression here, he or she is “different.” It's different, she or he different. So it's kind of almost by in the ‘90s, especially, it was kind of my stigma. I'm different. So. Things change, and things started changing probably close to the end of the ‘90s. And they changed tremendously in the twenty-first century when it's really became much more international. Campus students’ perception of the world, their traveling, their understanding of the foreign cultures.

Hannah Stoll 13:12
Describe your experience as a woman director. How has directing changed for you since you began?

Dr. Ignatieva 13:23

Excuse me. I think my cat is running wild. How has directing changed for me? Very, very interesting question. I do not want to become too professional. But directing and teaching and teaching acting, it's again, in general, it's a wonderful opportunity for the mutual kind of interactions and communications. Whether it's directing, or any other activities, I always learn from the students. That's why, for example, the Zoom thing. It's challenging the average equivalent of teaching because it's interactions, so, and the students always bring in so much on stage to class to, that it's, I don't know, it's just one of the most exciting things in the profession for me. As for directing in particular, I directed so far, I think, like almost nearly thirty shows. So here and at OSU Lima and Ohio Northern and, I don't know, it's magic. Try it.

Hannah Stoll 14:55
What has been your experience with balancing your role at work with gender expectations?

Dr. Ignatieva 15:03
It was very tough one in '94, '95, '96, because my then-husband, we're divorced since then, he moved back to Russia, ironically. So I didn't want to come. He did not want to stay there. So, I'm here, he's happy back to Moscow. So, but we had a little child. And the contract with him was not extended beyond two years. So he went to get his degree in playwriting at the University of Iowa, and I stayed here with our daughter. You understand? And I think that then I faced all the problems that women can possibly face because a) as part-timer, you understand, my insurance. My salary was small, the insurance, I remember that I paid for insurance, because I was a part-timer, this horrible, horrible price. So I pay for insurance more than my paycheck. And so I stayed with my daughter. And sometimes I didn't have a babysitter so I needed to take her, whether she was sick or not. I needed to take her with me for rehearsals. I remember that when I directed at Ohio Northern, she had a fever of 102 and the babysitter rejected, didn't want to come to sick child, so I took her with me in winter with a fever [unclear] what so she was there sweating during rehearsal while I was working with the actors. So in this respect, I think that I understand very well what women are coming from, especially because I've lived the life of a single parent. My then-husband could visit us once a month and once a month my daughter and I, we drove to Iowa City to visit him. But he was a graduate student, and I lived with our daughter and again, it was very tough.

Hannah Stoll 17:23
Please describe, if applicable, a specific point or incident that shifted your awareness about equity issues at Ohio State Lima.

Dr. Ignatieva 17:32
You mean equity or equality?

Hannah Stoll 17:35
I have here–

Dr. Ignatieva 17:38
Because equity is impartiality, equality is– so, which– that was one of my questions.

Hannah Stoll 17:44

What would you like to answer?

Dr. Ignatieva 17:47
I can answer both.

Hannah Stoll 17:49
Okay, you can answer both if you want.

Dr. Ignatieva 17:51
In the ‘90s, I believe that it was much more male-oriented culture than it is right now, including the faculty of Ohio State. And remember, since you know salary is a public record and everything, I remember how hurt I was one year after having directed three shows, and again, I lived with a little child and I needed to take care of her as well. Remember that when I checked the raises, all the male faculty were raised, various, were hugely different from female raises. And I remember this year it was particular bitter to me that I worked so, so many hours and I didn't get any raise at all. So, and I think that in behind it, it's the general understanding that we need to keep men happy, because they are the breadwinners. But in this case, so for me, it was very important to give the equal raise as man because I thought that, probably if I did not work that much, but at least I worked a lot and it needed to be recognized. So, and again, it's depending on some age of some of my male colleagues and it depends on the places where they come from. So it depends. So in general, it's very difficult to overcome traditional expectations of the culture if you were raised with understanding that man is the leading figure in the society. So, and sometimes, if the person was like twenty years older than I am, he would behave with me in a familiar way, regardless of the nationalities of countries. So whether he's going to pat my back or you say “hey, beautiful” or something like that. Even moving indeed, professors, professors, yes, so but, again, it changes and the society changes.

Hannah Stoll 20:50
How has being a woman faculty member on a regional campus changed over time?

Dr. Ignatieva 21:02
Well, I have to tell you, I was very, very honored to serve on the OSU President’s Council for Women for three years, which introduced me to a great variety of feminine problems and women's problems and women lecturers and teachers from all the university. And so that was a very important experience for me. So there is an interesting thing, I believe, that I wanted to mention to you again, because it's the cultural differences. Strangely enough, although there are terrible examples of male chauvinism in Russia, but somehow I was raised with a clear understanding that we're all equal, that there is no difference whether you're a man or a woman, and somehow I believed it, so, and I believed it to the extent that first years I didn't even understand what's the problem of the American feminism. So we're all equal, I know. So and then just studying the economic condition, and so then you understand what it was about. So, in terms of the role in the campus society, on campus in general, I would say that the faculty in general do not make any difference in your gender, if you bring something worthy to the campus community.

Hannah Stoll 23:00

What makes being a woman faculty member on the Lima Campus different from being on the Columbus Campus?

Dr. Ignatieva 23:09
Well, you know, on the Columbus campus again, I'm I served for three years on the President's Council for Women. And I taught several times the seminars for the graduate students in Columbus. And in general, I am friends with my Columbus colleagues. Well, we have a very female department except for three members, so we have a lot of women in the department in Columbus, and so they're very headstrong, opinionated and so, in general there is no unbalance right now. And if there is an unbalance, it is related to the personalities, not to gender.

Hannah Stoll 24:11
What work have you been involved with regarding institutional change? What did you do and what was the outcome both personally and institutionally?

Dr. Ignatieva 24:20
What do you mean by that?

Hannah Stoll 24:22
So anything on the campus that you actively tried to help or, just anything.

Dr. Ignatieva 24:33
Are you talking about serving on the committees?

Hannah Stoll 24:40
You can talk about that.

Dr. Ignatieva 24:42
So one of the things, one of the things I'm extremely proud of, and I'm sure that everyone forgot about it, but I remember because it's kind of my personal pride. At some point, Columbus had a policy that we – some of the grants were not – we were not eligible for some of the grants that Columbus folks were eligible for. So, and I'm very proud that when the President Gee came here – it was President Gee then – I asked him directly, why this discrepancy, why this inequality? He was very surprised. He was very shocked. Guess what? He changed after that. So this is my greatest pride and the old folks from – some of them are retired – they remember that. So I think it was very important for me to bring to the president to the issues of inequality between campuses, but now we're one campus. So, what else? I don't know. Because all my life is on this campus. So whether it's committees of academic misconduct, or if it is a faculty service committee, or if it is a teaching effectiveness, I don't know, this campus is all my life. Do you have anything particular in mind?

Hannah Stoll 26:19
Just seeing what you had to say about it. Tell me about why you decided to initiate the program Theatre for Young Audiences at OSU Lima. Describe your experience writing, adapting and directing the plays.

Dr. Ignatieva 26:36
Well, so let me tell you first, that I'm not original at all. What I mean, that a lot of my compatriots with my education with the theatre schools– the first thing they come to United States in different cities and towns, the first thing they ask, "Where's children's theatre?" And in many places, there is none. And it also again come from the long tradition, European tradition and Russian tradition that children have to experience theater since they are one to three years of age. Because children theater is learning. It's experience. It's exciting, excitement. It's all kind of things that only live theater could bring to children. And indeed, there was and has been, and there still is, a lack of theatre in Lima. So I was thinking that we as the Ohio State, we have the stage and we have excellent students. Our students are fantastic. And I'm telling you not because, I don't know, but I was teaching in Moscow in the professional theatre school. They are no worse than the ones that I taught at Moscow. And so the first time and I directed, I asked senior member, Joe Brandesky, he asked the dean who decided to do it for the first time in '95, and the elementary school children were bused from school, around the play, because the format is short. It should be like thirty-five to forty-five minutes because children cannot stand longer plays. And the first years were a pilot here. It worked, and the second year, we already had, I think about 2,500 elementary school students. So we should have celebrated twenty-fifth anniversary this year if not for COVID, so we postpone it for next year. And it was very important for me to remember that, and for all of us, that it could be one and only theatre experience for local kids because they are in a small place. Sometimes they saw productions and Civic Center and once in like ten years, but this is something that we can give them.

Hannah Stoll 29:36
Congratulations on twenty-five years, that's awesome.

Dr. Ignatieva 29:39
Yeah, I figure, yeah!

Hannah Stoll 29:43
What remains to be done relative to the progress of women at OSU Lima?

Dr. Ignatieva 29:52
Can you repeat the question, please? I read it, but I just wanted to hear it again.

Hannah Stoll 29:58
Yeah. What remains to be done relative to the progress of women at OSU Lima?

Dr. Ignatieva 30:09
Well, I think that we have to separate the issues. So, for example, in general, I think that it's very important to continue educating students on various aspects of gender issues. But it's not only gender. So probably have to have more courses on gender discrimination, on racial issues, on everything, so the students are aware. So, I would say that that would be my only concern, because in terms of equality on this campus, it's one of the friendliest and very fair campus towards its own members. We also have a daycare which is very important on campus. So I say just education, that would be very important for the current and future generations.

Hannah Stoll 31:21
And last question. Is there anything else you would like to talk about or plug or whatever?

Dr. Ignatieva 31:34
Sure, that I love this campus. I love the students. I mean, I've been since my official clock started ticking from '93 when I directed my first show. So it's been, as you understand, twenty-seven years and twenty-seven years of absolutely exciting discoveries, experience, work. And what is also very, I think, very fulfilling that I never expected it. We came here for one or two years and suddenly it became life for me and for my daughter. So.

Hannah Stoll 32:33
All right. Well, thank you so much for all your answers to my questions. I've really enjoyed it.