



TILTING AT TILSIT

By Kenneth N Kurtz

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Tilting at Tilsit

A Comedy of Imperial Egos

By Kenneth N. Kurtz

“Were Alexander a woman I would have made him my mistress.”

**From a letter Napoleon wrote to Josephine
after meeting the Tsar.**

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Cast

Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of France, 38

Alexander I, Tsar of All the Russias, 30

The Scene

June, 1807, an elegant tent erected on a planked log raft tied off in the measured middle of the River Niemen near the then East Prussian town of Tilsit. We see only the interior of this canvas pavilion, but as it floats on that jury-rigged barge, it tilts throughout the play when either of the emperors first steps aboard or toward the outer edges. Perhaps there is a fulcrum under the center of the platform with unseen springs or air bags at the extreme ends.

In short, a tent that tilts at Tilsit.

Note: Left and Right in this script are delineated from the audience's point of view rather than the traditional backstage orientation.

SCENE ONE

Lights up to reveal the interior of a very elegant tent. Canvas walls display wide vertical stripes of light gray and cream. At the four corners are wood posts that hope to enjoy the illusion of being Corinthian columns with gilded capitals. They support thin carved cornices over which the canvas stripes leap to cover a low framed pyramid. A Venetian glass chandelier hangs from the apex, just high enough to be beyond Napoleon's reach yet still allow the taller Tsar to walk under with his plumed hat. Late morning sunlight makes the tent top glow and dappled reflections of river waves lazily undulate along the translucent back wall.

A low buffet table stretches across the rear. Napoleon has ordered his chefs to load it with an epicurean map of the route from France to Russia. On the left are small bottles of Port and Sherry. Two much larger crystal decanters, delightfully gothic in form, hold a fine French white and red. Their silver stoppers are trimmed like cathedral spires to make an oenologist's Chartres. A tray of capons and one of cheeses flesh out the rest of France. The center of the long buffet becomes German. Westphalian ham dominates Hanoverian, Saxon and Bavarian goodies, as well as many lesser Teutonic edibles. Several bayonets are disported as serving knives. There is also a plate of decidedly lumpy Prussian potato pancakes. Next to it is a platter of Polish kielbasa, then a carafe of water, gathered from the Niemen of course. Beyond lies a tribute to Mother Russia in the form of a glorious pastry epergne holding cut glass bowls of caviar and topped by golden onions as a confectioner's version of St. Basil's cathedral. Plates of Swedish herring and Finnish salmon are tucked just to the upper left of Russia and on the down right corner is a bowl of easily munchable Turkish delights.

The planked floor of the tent is almost covered by an exquisite Persian carpet, no doubt "liberated" from the manse of a Prussian noble. On the left are two chairs and a small round table of Empire style. On the right is the type of divan that we call a Recamier after one of Paris's more memorable reclining ladies.

The striped canvas has been swaged back on either side to create entrances. The left swags are topped by a carving of one of Napoleon's eagles, gold and ever so martial. The opposite swags soar to a Russian double headed eagle, black but for gold crowns, and almost oriental in its feathered flamboyance. Beyond each entrance is a small canvas antechamber so that we never will actually get to see either the river or the emperors' boats when they arrive.

(As the lights come up we hear, from the river's left bank, a military band playing a French march. Then a vast crowd cheers:

“Vive l'Empereur!”

(From the right bank a smaller cheer arises of:

“Zhivi dolgo Tsar!”

(It is accompanied by the more forlorn flourish of several balalaikas. Next we hear the muffled swish of oars in the water.)

(Napoleon's distant voice)

Row faster you scum. Possession is the first step toward victory.

(His marines laugh, followed by faster swishes and then the bump of boat hitting raft. Now the chandelier quivers.)

(Napoleon's voice closer)

No, stay down. Your Emperor needs no help to conquer a raft of logs.

(He jumps aboard and for the first time we see the tent tilt a bit to the left. Napoleon enters and strides center, righting all in the process, but the chandelier continues to sway.

He wears the familiar dark blue and white uniform of a colonel of the Guards, including his trademark black bicorne hat. He's Napoleon in his prime, paunch only incipient and in no way defeating robust drive. He turns to walk, hands clasped behind back, inspecting the buffet as he would his troops and is pleased. Then he appraises the furniture, moves the two chairs a bit closer, and warmly pats the cushion of the Recamier.

Now he notices the bothersome sway of the chandelier, tries to reach it, then uses his hat to bat it into stillness. One more look around and then he bolts toward the other entrance just in time to be there when another bump occurs. Of course the tent now tilts a bit to the right.)

(Napoleon's voice)

Welcome Russia.

(When Alexander steps aboard, the tent tilts even more, and the chandelier is once more swaying.)

(Alexander's voice)

My thanks to France. How pleasant to see both of our eagles flying high above as weather vanes, but please providence, no roaring lion. I hate the English, and will help you in any enterprise against them.

(Napoleon's voice)

Well, if that's the case, then peace is already made. Come in, come in.

(Alexander comes on first and strides center to gaze admiringly about the pavilion. Napoleon follows. The Tsar is a full head taller. Reddish blond hair, bright blue eyes, smooth yet ruddy cheeks, slender and well-formed, he is the eight-years-younger essence of aristocratic grace. His bicorne soars jauntily fore and aft, whereas his host's hat famously plunks abaft the beam. Alexander seems to have been poured into the slim green and white uniform of a general of the Russian guard.)

ALEXANDER

How very charming. Tell me, besides ammunition and kitchens, do *decoreteurs* follow in your army's train?

NAPOLEON

No, just my corps of engineers, none of them high-born, but all nonetheless trained in the arts of peace as well as war.

ALEXANDER

And most successfully. I shall look forward to seeing their decorative rendition of troops crossing a pontoon bridge.

NAPOLEON

As we are here to make peace, I trust that you will never have that pleasure. Damn that chandelier.

(Alexander effortlessly reaches up to stop it in mid swing.)

Thank you. And here we are floating in the middle of the River Niemen, on an artificial island so to speak, except it has the annoying habit of tilting. I have been given to understand that meeting on this raft was your excellent idea. A way to provide a neutral form of safety for diplomacy. My engineers merely added decor, but perhaps they are in need of better training in the art of mooring. I do so hate fluidity. We must find ways to strike a balance. A much firmer one.

ALEXANDER

But a level one, nonetheless.

NAPOLEON

Terra firma has ever been my goal. Did you know that my worst nightmares have always involved water?

ALEXANDER

Water? I am surprised to find that the great conqueror has any nightmares.

NAPOLEON

Everyone has them. What are yours?

ALEXANDER

Let us say that my nightmares are mine, no more than that.

NAPOLEON

Oh come, come. I have just allowed you a glimpse of my innermost soul. Certainly, if we are to trust each other and be allies, let alone become good friends, you can do the same.

ALEXANDER

Very well: Father and God.

NAPOLEON

Interesting. You mean your father's mysterious sudden death and God's possible retribution?

ALEXANDER

Now you are treading water in the most dangerous of ways. Perhaps I should take my leave.

NAPOLEON

No, no, stay, please. You must excuse my boldness, surely the greatest of my faults. We are here to make peace and to re-carve Europe's map. To make terra a bit firmer so to speak.

ALEXANDER

But after the victory of Austerlitz, you would seem to hold the only carving knife. My poor army limps on our side of this river.

NAPOLEON

No, you must not consider yourself defeated. I certainly do not. Your army nearly held me back at Elau.

ALEXANDER

Yes, but only nearly. I was present at Austerlitz and witnessed the results of your brilliance. I have most miserably experienced the grim taste of defeat.

NAPOLEON

I know. From my hill I saw you through my telescope. Saw your horse prance nervously on your far hill while Marshal Kutuzov's stood stolid. Watched the old bear seem to sleep in his saddle while you, like some proud young stag, arched your neck to see everything. Moments later, I turned my spyglass back to your hill and saw that you had yours trained on me. I almost waved.

ALEXANDER

So did I, but then your cavalry rolled over our flank and your massed guards stormed though to crush our center. Did you watch me flee as well when all was lost?

(Napoleon starts to pace from one side of the tent to the other, for he hates sitting and worse, just standing.

Alexander follows with each answer, and thus the tent will be back to tilting and the chandelier to even wilder swaying.)

NAPOLEON

No, no. Couldn't have. Cannon smoke is worse than any fog. One never can see much of anything at a battle's end. At such times victory is every bit as blind as defeat.

ALEXANDER

Well...I fled, galloped that horse as fast as I could. Spent the night hiding in a ditch and wept myself to sleep.

NAPOLEON

Did you have...

ALEXANDER

Nightmares? Yes, of you on that far hill waving your battalions to the charge.

NAPOLEON

Oh my dear, dear, boy.

(Napoleon clumsily pats him on the back.)

You must not think of any of those battles as a defeat for Russia. For Austria and Prussia, yes. But your troops were brave, hard-fighting adversaries, while theirs were only the wretched pawns of two unworthy and devious princes.

(He's off and pacing again.)

Neither has the greatness of their famous forbearers. Franz Joseph dithers in the midst of a doddering Viennese court and Frederick jerks to his queen's marionette strings. Women have managed to ruin so many men. Indeed, whenever a woman tries to influence my decisions, I do the opposite of whatever she proposes. I tried very hard to gain the friendship of those two monarchs as the best way to make peace. In our world of emperors the trust of true and lasting friendship may be the only possible way to make a world orderly as well as safe.

(Alexander, hearing this, starts to cross over to Napoleon's side.)

ALEXANDER

And I have come here to entertain that offer of friendship, and more important, to learn from your example.

(Napoleon halts him center.)

NAPOLEON

Good, good, good, but I think we should consecrate our alliance here in the center. This tilting--tipping is making me a bit queasy. Besides, my stomach seems to churn a bit of late. And that damn chand...

(Alexander stills it with ease.)

ALEXANDER

Venetian glass, no?

NAPOLEON

Yes, a gift from the republic that I liberated from Austrian control.

ALEXANDER

Liberated? With force or friendship?

NAPOLEON

Both. Force first, friendship after.

ALEXANDER

Ah, is that your motto?

NAPOLEON

Sometimes an unfortunate necessity.

(He crosses to a corner.)

But surely not in our instance.

(Alexander starts toward him.)

No, no. Don't follow. You forget that we must balance this damn raft.

(Alexander suddenly understands and goes to the opposite corner.)

May I call you Alexander?

ALEXANDER

Only if I may call you "Naboleone".

NAPOLEON

(Starts to cross. Alexander, catching on, does too.)

And thus remind me of my vulgar Corsican roots?

(They meet, center.)

ALEXANDER

Or your mastery of France.