

Robert Dessaix's idea of what's erotic: distant places, foreign languages and crisp airline timetables. So retracing the steps of 19th-century Russian writer Turgenev was sure to supply some exquisite frissons. **Caroline Baum** falls under the storyteller's spell.

# To Russia with love

**S**OMETHING ABOUT ROBERT Dessaix makes women want to put him in their pocket and take him home. This happens from Perth to Byron Bay, usually at

writers' festivals where fervent admirers, especially women of a certain age, fall in love with him anew each time he writes a book. They know there is no hope of their feelings being reciprocated, as he bats for the other team. It doesn't help that he's a shameless flirt – author Marion Hallgan once described him as a terrible tart.

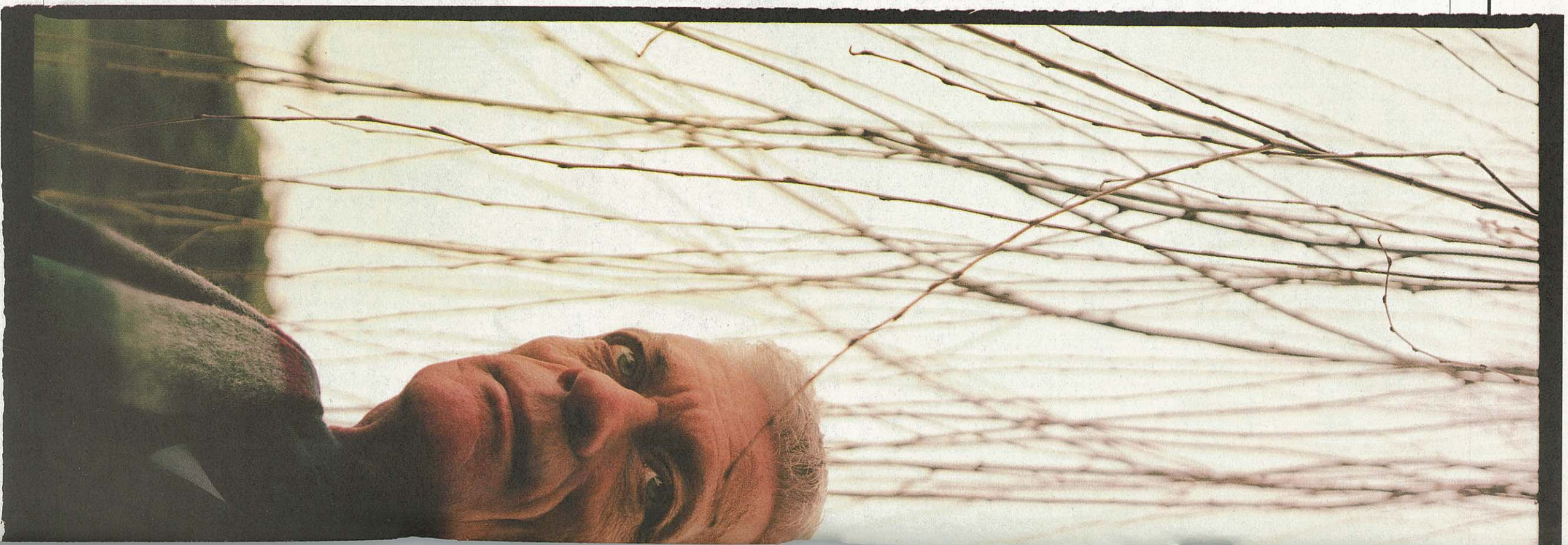
Unusually among writers, Dessaix relishes the opportunity to perform for his public, confident in a slightly exaggerated tone and style honed over years as a radio broadcaster and enhanced by a physical presence reminiscent of Robert Helpmann: blue eyes as vivid as those of a tropical lizard; chiselled cheekbones in a gaunt, dark-skinned face; voluble hands fluttering as he makes a point; the slim frame. The effect is mesmerising.

Dessaix's technique with his readers and listeners is to confide in them, to share his most intimate thoughts, to draw his audience in with a chattily conspiratorial tone. Come with me on a journey, he whispers enticingly, and before they know it they are with him in Cairo (*A Mother's Disgrace*), Italy (*Night Letters*), Corfu (*Corfu*) or Alice Springs (*and so forth*), held captive to a curious 21st-century version of Scheherazade, every inch the seducer.

This time, Dessaix is taking his readers on a pilgrimage to Russia, via France and Germany, a journey he first embarked on at the age of 11, when, for no apparent reason, he bought himself a Russian dictionary and became bewitched by that language. As he recounts in the memoir about his adoption and his sexual identity, *A Mother's Disgrace*, Dessaix became a scholar of Russian at ANU. After studying in Moscow, he wrote a book on the 19th-century writer Ivan Turgenev, who has continued to be a lifelong obsession.

Dessaix, now 60, first read Turgenev as a student. "The ideas in *Fathers and Sons* formed a cluster around a fault line in my mind. The book really asks: if the universe is all there is, then what's the point in anything?"

Returning to his fascination with Turgenev, his approach is now less orthodox, more personal. Part journal, part essay, part biography, *Twilight of Love: Travels with Turgenev* demolishes the idea of cultural tourism, of visiting sacred sites such as writers' homes and expecting to find anything genuine there. Opinionated, idiosyncratic, defiantly elitist in his assumption that his readers are as culturally literate as he is in several languages, Dessaix wanders in search of his subject while asking himself profound questions – about the nature of love and the existence of the soul. And all this without a footnote in sight. One can almost hear his audience swooning in anticipation of this magical mystery tour. Not







"When I'm there, I feel like a different person, more wicked, more outrageous, freer to experiment"; Robert Dessaix on the allure of Russia.

everyone is a fan, of course ("of course" being one of Dessaix's favourite phrases, suggesting that you, the reader or listener, already agree with whatever he is about to declare). His detractors find Dessaix affected, priggish, prissy and mannered. *The Sydney Morning Herald's* literary critic, Andrew Riemer, is among those impervious to Dessaix's charms, describing the narrator of *Corfu* (a somewhat camper version of Dessaix) as "an occasionally pompous aesthete prone to episodic swooning".

Dessaix, himself a seasoned critic, acknowledges that he can be self-indulgent and steers a fine line this side of self-parody. But he is a unique figure in the Australian literary landscape, blending gossip, charm, anecdote, intellectual name-dropping and genuine erudition in a mix that defies categorisation as fiction or non-fiction. And there are plenty of people who fantasise about Dessaix as their ideal travelling companion.

Travel is one of Dessaix's greatest pleasures and recurring themes. Once a year, he chooses a destination. He likes to go alone, leaving his partner, art critic Peter Timmins, at home in their large house in Hobart (where Dessaix has two libraries, one devoted exclusively to Russian books; there is also a living room large enough to pass for a ballroom in a modest Russian nobleman's residence). He often meets up with travelling companions along the way – usually from among his group of female friends. (Dessaix also writes with several women in mind – writers Drusilla Modjeska and Isabel Huggan and journalists Suzy Baldwin and Andrea Stretton – close friends he imagines himself talking to, who are at once adoring and not afraid to be critical.)

This year his destination was Oman, a few years ago it was Albania. Next it will be Zanzibar. "I like to choose places that are utterly foreign and forbidden. I get an erotic stimulation from that, the electric charge of it helps me to define myself," says Dessaix. The word erotic is immensely important to him, but it is rarely a sexual frisson that he is referring to. Among the things he lists as erotic are boxes with sliding lids, mulberry lipstick (on women, in case you were wondering), fragile wrists, men who limp, waiters and airline timetables on crisp paper.

Languages are erotic, "because they allow you to feel more variedly", says Dessaix, who at different times in his life has studied and spoken Indonesian, Spanish, Polish and Finnish. When the distinguished Russian writer Andrei Makine, winner of France's most eminent literary award, the Prix Goncourt, met Dessaix, he refused to believe that Dessaix was not Russian. In France, where Dessaix's books are available in translation, he has developed a media profile by being able to do interviews in French. Even his name allows him to pass as one of them.

Russia cast its spell on Dessaix through language. He mentions, by way of example, that there are two words for blue in Russian "so you have to pay attention to which one to use. In Russian, the word melancholy is not a negative, so it offers a whole different

view of the universe. When I'm there, I feel like a different person, more wicked, more outrageous, freer to experiment."

"She (I always think of Russia in the feminine, all the words for her in Russian are feminine – motherland, country, even Moscow is a feminine name, Moskva) seduced me through her complexity and the forbidden nature of her exoticness. The official philosophy was at odds with everything I believed in, and that excited me: I like being in opposition to an ideology, I love the dynamic of tension," says Dessaix, almost shivering with pleasure, although he has never gone in for public dissent. Nevertheless, he did a few risky things when he was coming and going to Russia regularly in the late 1960s and early '70s, smuggling in Bibles and other banned books and travelling outside city limits without the required visa. He knows he was under surveillance, and quite enjoyed the experience: "It's fun to have meetings in secret, to make your calls from public phone booths." While he enjoys a secret (and is a *Le Carré* fan) he is too keen to share it to have ever considered becoming a spy. "I'd be too eager to blurt." And he is not sufficiently political to align himself with a cause. "I am not an unconditional patriot, so I'd probably end up a double agent. And I am not a team player," he says with exaggerated emphasis.

"I value friendship, love and beauty, rather than principles." At home in Tasmania, however, he was a prominent boycotter of a recent arts festival in protest at sponsorship by a forestry company and remains indignant on the subject.

**A**LTHOUGH DESSAIX WRITES NOW ABOUT a search for the meaning of love and its place in a troubled world, he has, in the past, been a good hater, possessed of a waspish wit, caustic tongue and a sometimes dismissive temperament. There have been acrimonious fallings-out, particularly with "any woman who tried to control me for more than 20 years and tries to be my mother," he says, referring obliquely to his Russian professor at ANU, Tatjana Cizova. "I've created my own mothers," he adds archly, "the mother church, Mother Russia, the motherland." Perhaps this belief in the right to choose is peculiar to adopted children (who never grasp the idea that most of us do not choose our parents) and is more acute if, like Dessaix, one is also an only child, adding to that sense of specialness.

A friend from his days at ANU, Natalie Staples, to whom *Travels with Turgenev* is dedicated, remembers that "at university he had relationships with women of authority. He was possessed by Cizova and women like her; he lent glory to them but he was treated like a pet and handled as a possession." She describes the 19-year-old Dessaix, who then went by the name of Robert Jones after his adoptive parents (he changed it to that of his biological parents when he got his doctorate at the age of 30), as "precocious, disciplined, striking, aloof, innocent and puritanical. He didn't drink or smoke and he was very uncharitable about people's ailments because he'd been brought up by Christian Scientists."



He has mellowed, partly due to the waves of affection that are the main reward of his success, and partly as the result of being diagnosed HIV positive in 1994, an experience which he has managed, with quiet courage, to see not as a death sentence but as an opportunity to put everything in perspective and allow him to focus on what really matters. Suddenly he was no longer “facing forward” like everyone else, rushing around with a sense of purpose. But Turgenev continued to matter, even as Dessaix was finding his own voice as a writer.

**T**HOUGH NOW LARGELY IGNORED, even in his own country, in favour of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Chekhov, Turgenev holds a special fascination for Dessaix. The author of such romantic classics as *A Month in the Country*, *A Nest of Gentry* and *On the Eve*, stories in which the boy hardly ever gets the girl, Turgenev was, in his day, a literary superstar, who numbered Flaubert and Zola among his friends and was at home in all the best salons of Europe. Dessaix feels a profound affinity for the 19th-century writer who lived a life of cultural refinement, was a master at the art of conversation, travelled widely and was consumed, for his entire life, by a great love for the opera singer Pauline Viardot.

It is this relationship that lies at the heart of Dessaix's own journey of discovery, taking him from Baden Baden to Paris, and then on to Moscow and beyond. In each place, he visits houses where Turgenev and the Viardots lived, trying to feel the writer's presence. In most places, he is disappointed, but he continues his pursuit, like a hunter (which Turgenev himself was, shooting his way across the aristocracy's estates in Europe and Russia). Part of this quest lies in his

curiosity about the intriguing shape of the writer's life. Turgenev was one side of a triangle, a ménage à trois, or to use a more appropriate Russian word, a troika (an open carriage pulled by three horses, its passengers usually swathed in furs as they gallop through snow scenes in clichéd oil paintings) with Viardot and her husband. (Dessaix, the only child, seems to be entirely comfortable in a triangle himself. Here he is, in one corner; in another, the domestic bliss of his home life with his partner of more than 20 years; in another, his regular need for escape and adventure. Or again, here he is, between Tasmania, a tiny island at the bottom of the earth, and Russia, a giant expanse framed by Europe and the Orient. It is his perfect dynamic, a shape that expresses angularity and tension rather than dull symmetry.)

The obvious, intriguing but unanswered question about Turgenev and Viardot, particularly in an age of instant gratification and sexual liberation, is: did they or didn't they? Dessaix prefers to think they didn't, that theirs was a heady cocktail of passion, respect and true friendship. He is rather dismissive of sexual pleasure in general, and hasn't got much to say in favour of marriage, either,

although he is to all intents and purposes married now (and actually was, once before, for 11 years to a woman he met at ANU). When asked what he fears most, the answer is not death “although I can hear its rustle all around us now” but “of leaving Peter alone”. He has given up smoking recently and despite eating little or nothing due to his medication, his health is stable. But he gets exhausted after



I feel a real kinship with him. We're both privileged, we both live in lovely houses, but I've also seen people live lives that are brutish and short. I think about suffering all the time. Writing this book made me depressed, because I was identifying with Turgenev too much – Peter got quite worried about me. But there is a way to live through it, and that's what I'd want to talk to him about.”

In their conversation, Dessaix knows that he would easily be able to use a word he says no longer has a place in modern life. “Turgenev understood what the word ‘soul’ meant, and Russians still use that word, *dusha*. We thought we knew what love was, a twinning of affection, warmth, desire, admiration, sentimentality and animality, but slowly over the last 150 years it's unravelled because we don't believe in a soul.” Spirituality and transcendence, these are the lofty topics Dessaix and Turgenev could converse about, in exquisitely elegant language.

In the real world, Dessaix draws comfort and inspiration from a seemingly lowlier, non-verbal source: his dog. “Max is more important to me than he should be. He teaches me and he is blissfully civilised, the epitome of ‘be here now’ philosophy.” In between forays into the unknown, Hobart remains a sanctuary for renewal, where Dessaix attends weekly gay ballroom dancing lessons (he tried the straight version but got tired of having to lead all the time) and sees friends including green and gay activists Bob Brown and Rodney Croome, as well as Natalie Staples, who researched the finer details of the Turgenev book. He walks everywhere, never having learned to drive. “I love to be *transported*,” he explains. On planes, he enjoys popular novels and is currently immersed in *The Da Vinci Code*.

## He feels a profound affinity for the earlier writer, consumed by a lifelong love for a married woman. **“Turgenev understood what the word ‘soul’ meant.”**

a public performance, perhaps because of the illusion he strives to create: very much the showman, he appears to be improvising, thinking on his feet, when in fact every speech is rehearsed down to the last syllable. He is probably the best reader of his own work among all of Australia's writers. As *The Age's* literary critic Peter Craven noted of the audio version of Dessaix's best-selling book *Night Letters*, “Dessaix reads his masterpiece with a rather surprising virtuoso technique that no actor would be likely to equal.”

So, if he were interviewing Turgenev just as he once interviewed the world's best writers on Radio National's *Books and Writing* program, what would he ask him? “I'd want to know what sort of love this was, I'd want to ask him how you keep going in life. Turgenev wasn't suicidal but as he got older he was haunted by the horrors of what he had seen.

“Max is more important to me than he should be ... He is blissfully civilised”. (above) Dessaix and his canine friend and teacher.

**A**S IF HIS PASSPORT WERE NOT ALREADY full enough, Dessaix still visits his own imaginary country, which he invented when he was five years old and called The Pure Land, every day. “Of course. This morning I had trouble with plane schedules and making my connection on time,” he says, perfectly straight-faced. He still talks the made-up language of The Pure Land, “but only to myself and to Max, never to another human being. The strange thing is that I've only just realised how perfectly Tasmania matches The Pure Land – it is also an island, it has a river running through the middle, its capital is also on a bay, with a mountain, its airport is on the same side. It's quite spooky.”

The virtual tour is over, and no joking matter. Even though Dessaix lives in a place where he can breathe the world's purest air, his imagination craves a stronger oxygen.

He is already searching for a new topic and thinks it might have something to do with silence. However wordless the subject, Dessaix's fans know he'll have plenty to say about it, in several languages. Of course. ■

*Robert Dessaix's Twilight of Love: Travels with Turgenev will be published next month by Pan Macmillan; rrp \$40.*