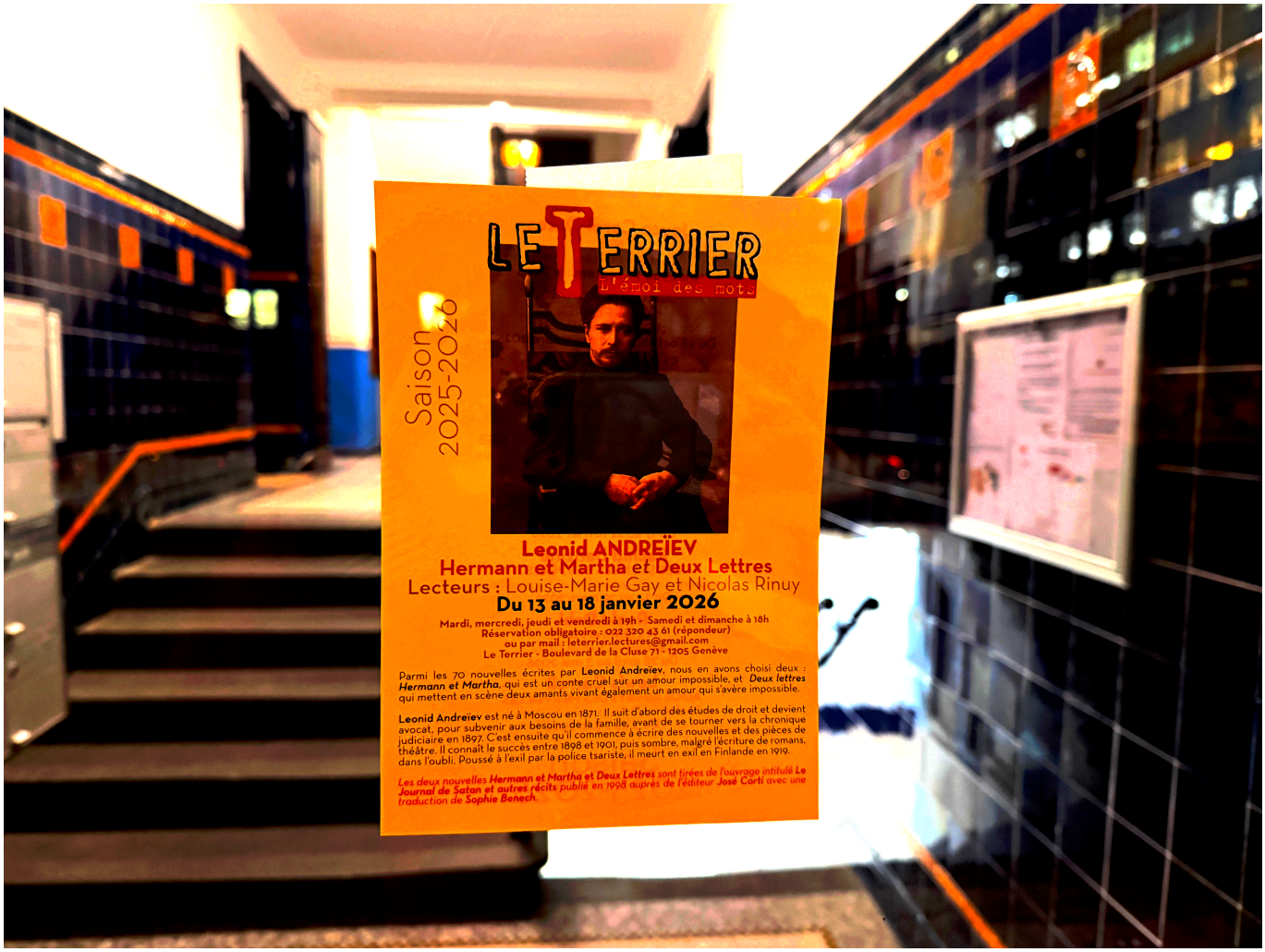
Опубликовано на Швейцария: новости на русском языке (https://nashagazeta.ch)

Leonid Andreyev and Vasily Grossman at Geneva’s “Burrow”

14.01.2026.



This poster now adorns the entrance of an ordinary Geneva building Photo © N. Sikorsky

Last night I spent the evening in a basement. A real basement, located at 71, boulevard de la Cluse. This basement has an official name, “Le Terrier” (The Burrow), and on one of the walls of its tiny auditorium hangs a portrait of the venue’s founder, the venerable Rat. (Yes, Paris is not the only city with its own Ratatouille!). The walls of two other rooms, where the audience gathers before being led into the auditorium, are covered with the names of authors whose works have been read aloud here for the past twenty-six years.

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Yesterday, the name of Leonid Andreyev appeared on the wall. He is a Russian writer and playwright who is still insufficiently known, a prominent figure of the Silver Age of Russian literature and one of the founders of Russian Expressionism. After rejecting the Revolution of 1917, Andreyev went into exile following Finland’s separation from Russia. From Finland he wrote to the artist Nicholas Roerich: “All my misfortunes come down to one thing: I have no home. There used to be a small home, a summer house in Finland, and a large home, Russia, with its mighty support, strength, and vastness. There was also the most spacious home of all, art and creation, where the soul could retreat. And everything is gone. Instead of the small home, there is a cold, frozen, tattered summer house with broken windows, and all around is an alien and hostile Finland. There is no Russia…”

On September 12, 1919, at six in the evening, Leonid Andreyev died suddenly of cardiac paralysis, a myocardial infarction, in the Finnish village of Mustamäki. This place must have been very similar to Metsikylä, another Finnish village where the events of his short story “Hermann and Martha” take place. Many years ago, this story was beautifully translated into French by Sophie Benech, and last night it was read just as beautifully by Louise-Marie Gay. Louise-Marie is not a professional actress. She works in the administration of the Lausanne Chamber Orchestra. I would never have guessed.

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Nicolas Rinuy, on the other hand, is an experienced actor and a well-known figure in Geneva. The joint reading of Leonid Andreyev’s 1916 short story “Two Letters,” performed by him, a dignified gray-haired gentleman, and by her, a young and charming woman, was both natural and deeply moving. You still have the opportunity to hear them every evening until January 18, inclusive.

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And from February 17 to 22, “The Burrow” will host readings of Vasily Grossman’s 1953 text “Abel (August the Sixth),” which I presented not long ago, along with the actor Philippe Lüscher, who will be reading it.

It was Philippe who first told me about “The Burrow.” He is the president of this association of book lovers. In his annual message to the club’s members, he wrote: “In this twenty-sixth season, we wish to share with you texts which, through the quality of their form and their originality, have left a lasting mark on the history of literature. We also wish to present other works of equal value, works that engage with the complexity of the modern world. In them, voices of protest are heard, History repeats itself, the theme of impossible and unattainable love unfolds, the perspectives of a writer and a photographer intersect, the shaping of human identity in our society is explored, and finally, a reimagined and wondrous world is brought to life.”

Come to “The Burrow,” friends. It is warm and cosy here. All your questions can be sent to: leterrier.lectures@gmail.com

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Russian literature in French

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