



# RUSSIAN NOTEBOOK '17-'18

from Yury Urnov

#5

5/18

21 May 2018

## Dear Friends,

Yuri's conversation with Maksym Kurochkin is, for me, a deeply satisfying read. That conversation reflects both the long personal and professional history of these two theatre artists (Max from Ukraine and Yuri from Russia), also gives us a real, on-the-ground sense of what is being lost in these dark times.

I met Max through Yuri around 2000, and shared some wild rides with him in both Russia and the US.

But, Max is now back home in Kiev, and he speaks about his work, his times, and leaving Russia, in a clear voice.

Yuri and I did the final edit of this one last week in Budapest—he joined me for the second half of my three week visit (I just got back late Saturday). While we saw some stunning theatre, our time was a sobering, and sometimes surreal 10 days:



The Alexei Malobrodsky saga was jammed with a court appearance, a probable heart-attack in the courtroom, withholding medical support, and finally a release home (on his own recognizance—no house arrest, but simply a signed agreement to not leave the country).



The theatre community was still reeling from the untimely death of Mikhail Ugarov, co-founder of theatre.doc with his partner and wife, playwright Yelena Gremina, when we learned on Wednesday last that Yelena had died that morning. [John Freedman wrote a substantial tribute for his old paper, \*The Moscow Times\*.](#)



An hour after I got the news of Lena's death, I had a meeting with Bela Pinter, with actor Eva Enyedi doing the translation. When I asked where his manager, Eszter Uri was, I learned that she had passed away 10 days earlier. A cancer, first diagnosed only four months earlier, had ended this promising life and career.



And finally, the buzz in Budapest was Arpad Schilling's public announcement that he and his family were leaving Hungary for a new life in France.



And to round out this litany on a positive note, CITD's long-time partner in Hungary, Andrea Tompa, won the prestigious Libri Literary Award last week for her new novel, *Omerta*.

I'll be reporting on that Budapest visit in our next Hungarian Letter of News.

Stay strong, my friends,

**Philip Arnoult**

founder & director



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## DEAR FRIENDS,

This is probably my saddest issue. But I kind of can't help it. I thought I had finished my work on it, when I got on the plane May 8th, to join Philip in Budapest for 10 days of theater and meetings. But more and more news kept coming in from Moscow.

On April 1st Mikhail Ugarov, the co-founder of the Doc Theater, the father of the New Drama movement in Russia passed away at the age of 62 from heart attack – too quickly, the ambulance came soon but was late. On May 16<sup>th</sup> his wife and Doc Theater Director Elena Gremina died after sudden heart and kidneys failure in Moscow; she was 61. Within six weeks the whole generation of contemporary artists in Russia was orphaned. The work of Ugarov and Gremina was crucially important for the development of Russian theater in the past three decades – both aesthetics and ethics of almost every playwright under 50 in my country was either formed or (at least) seriously affected by this couple. I was interviewing Maksym Kurochkin, the headliner of this issue after Mikhail's and before Elena's deaths, so Max is mostly talking here below about Misha. I don't want to edit this part, but I promise to write about Elena specifically in my next issue.



Just a couple weeks before Ugarov's death we were saying last farewells to Oleg Tabakov, the Artistic Director of the Moscow Art Theater, one of the few real icons of our acting school, and arguably the most influential Russian artist. [Here's the link to Philip's remembrances](#) – they two first met when in their 30s, and kept their friendship alive for more than four decades.

On April 18th, the Kafkaesque saga of the “Seventh Studio” (Gogol Center) case victims received continuation at the Moscow Basmanny District Court, and after 6 hours ended up with the both predictable and absurdist Judge Karpov's announcement: *“The prosecution's motions are to be sustained. Malobrodsky is to stay in detention. Serebrennikov, Apfelbaum and Itin are to stay under house arrest.”* In my last section, I'm sharing both the highlights of this session, and the link to the full report. It should be put on stage, really.

As we were preparing this issue for publishing the situation turned even darker. On May 10th Alexei was brought to the Basmanny Court again. Surprisingly, investigators were petitioning for moving

him from prison to under the house arrest. After the prosecutor's office and the Judge refused to do so, Alexei reportedly had a heart attack right in the court room. The ambulance was called but the officials didn't let medics take Malobrodsky to the hospital for many hours, ignoring his health condition; when they finally did, he was chained by handcuffs to his swing-bed there.

Yet, the very final update is optimistic: on May 16<sup>th</sup> Malobrodsky was let go home – the Investigative Committee suddenly changed the preventive measure from arrest to street bail. We are certainly all happy here, and we even raised glass of Hungarian “Unicum” liqueur with Philip in Budapest to Alexei's freedom. But we also realize how awful it is we're so happy about this only partial rectification of an injustice.

## ABOUT MAKSYM KUROCHKIN

Almost a year ago, when I just got back to Moscow, Maksym Kurochkin, one of the leading playwrights of Ukrainian origin who used to write most of his texts in Russian language, was packing his bags to leave Russia permanently moving to Kiev. His decision was sober, conscious, and politically motivated: he couldn't any more live in the country occupying one part of his motherland and fueling a bloody conflict in the other one. Max is and will always stay my favorite playwright, but Russian culture probably lost him forever, as well as many other artists from Ukraine who now don't even want to set their feet on the Russian soil. Thanks to CITD and John Freedman, Maksym's name is quite familiar to the Americans. John translated each and every of his plays into English, and Philip brought him to the US on multiple occasions: Towson year of New Russian Drama project, WordBridge Festival, multiple trips to Austin where Max's plays were produced by the Breaking String Theater, and number of other visits.

I first met him over 20 years ago, when we both began our careers at the Debut Centre – the first place in Moscow of the 90-s to support young playwrights, directors, and actors. Since then I've directed 4 full productions after his plays, and numerous workshops in both Russian and English.



*Maksym is reading his KITCHEN out loud to the crowd of tens of thousands on the protest march in Moscow. April 2014*

I believe Max always considered himself a loser, while was and is one of the most successful playwrights writing in Russian. London's Royal Court and Moscow Art Theater produced his plays; the first large-scale independent theater of post-Soviet Russia “Theater Partnership 814” commissioned and produced his enormous KITCHEN; he has always been the favorite playwright of Theater Doc and one of their key faces; he wrote for film and TV, and was acting in films...

Yet, he was never satisfied with his own work. NEVER. It was always something like: “Oh, let's not even go there, Yuri, I just wrote another horrible play, a truly horrible one.” First I thought it was a mask, but very soon I amusedly understood it was not; Max always had extremely strict requirements to the written text, and even more so when it came to the texts of his own. Neither he ever sounded will-less or give-up; I used to see him full of internal energy and ready for the mortal combat. Russian invasion of Ukraine hit him badly, it was

hard to not notice; he had to make a choice. But now he sounds happier, he is in Kiev, and he writes, and his plays are produced again and again, now in his homeland.

Below I'm interviewing Maksym about his departure, politics and art.

## INTERVIEW WITH MAKSYM KUROCHKIN

### *LEAVING FOR UKRAINE*

YURY: It's important for me we talk both politics and theater today... Knowing you for quite a long time now, I understand you've left Russia for Ukraine purposefully and consciously; that it was an open political choice. I suspect I know, but I still want you to answer – why did you leave?

M. I have a thousand of answers: because I was squashed, because I was humiliated and abused, because I was destroyed... I don't know if it makes any sense to keep repeating these words... My life was destroyed... I know there is a better answer, but I want so badly to not think about it... And yet I know I will keep trying to answer this question for the rest of my life... Because I felt fooled... Because everything I've done before lost sense... at least most of it...

YURY: Can you detect the moment you've made this decision?

MAKSYM: I was trying to bear with what was going on for a long time. Even during the winter days of 2013-2014 when Russian TV was pushing for the belligerent solution of the Maidan conflict, I was like "all right, it's the same old song, they were saying same things in 2004. Yes, all these lies and all these forgeries again, but look, this is how they are dealing with internal Russian problems too, so what's new" ... The rhetoric was the same as in 2004 so I hoped it was all talk again. Soon yet I realized, events in Kiev went after Moscow scenario, and then there was the first blood. From there on my decision was clear, and my only task was to leave without losing my family and my kids... So the short answer is – after the first protester was killed on Maidan – Serhiy Nigoyan was his name.

YURY: The first moment I felt we were really in trouble was the Duma (Parliament) elections of 1995, when democrats hardly gathered 10% of the vote. Since then the future only felt less and less hopeful to me, and all the following events, including return of the KGB into power, demolition of the independent TV, Khodorkovsky's imprisonment, and so on and on and on – into 2010-s with the Nemtsov's murder and Ukrainian war - felt like development of the same trend. Hurting yet not very much surprising. Is your experience similar?

MAKSYM: Yes, it is. Turn of the century was obviously the turning point of the scenario, then it became clear that, like in "The Song of the Nibelungs", it will all end up with Huns coming and "drowning everyone in the outhouse".

YURY: And this is when you wrote your KITCHEN ...

MAKSYM: Yes. And yes, the tendency was already very clear, and now I feel guilt for staying allegorical in my KITCHEN, when it was time to straightforwardly name things by their names.

YURY: So this play is the result of your presentiment...



MAKSYM: Not so much of a presentiment really; everything was quite clear and future was calculable – my education is in history, so I knew pretty well where it was going.

YURY: KITCHEN isn't only your most open political statement, but also the only one, isn't it?

MAKSYM: Well, in this play I screamed out loud about what I saw, and very few things changed since then; there wasn't much of the new incoming information since...

*Both laugh*

Really, as soon as the structure was built, the rest were just predictable consequences...

Actually I kept trying to write political plays, but none of them was strong enough. I made at least 4 attempts. But I was too allegorical, or probably just afraid to look at this reality through the open eyes, and to speak about it straightforwardly...

But look at Nikolay Erdman. While he was somewhat distanced from understanding of the reality surrounding him, he wrote SUICIDE - with drive, humor, and spite. And when he finally realized what was going on – he just stopped writing. While he could stay playful with these hard topics – it worked. But when it became too real – he couldn't any more. Probably I have a similar problem.



*Oleg Menshikov and Oksana Mysina in the 2000 production of KITCHEN by Theater Comradery 814, Moscow, Russia.*

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**KITCHEN**  
*Translated by John Freedman*

**2000**

HOT CHEF

So how are we going to get out of here?

GUNTHER

One more problem to solve. (*To HAGEN.*) Come on, barbarian, do something. Reinstate lines of communication. Tell your friends in the security forces to quit messing in my personal affairs.

*Hagen is silent.*

What's the matter? Why are you looking at me like that? Did I say something wrong? (*To HAGEN.*) What is wrong? Call, shout, write letters. There are no hostages here! Nobody is being killed! You can't kill a man who is already dead. We're having a friendly little party here. A wedding. We're throwing a wedding! I invited all of you, my dear people, to the wedding of a woman I love. But you may leave.

HOT CHEF

Weddings are good. But to tell you the truth, I think I'll go.

GUNTHER

Go on, go on –

HOT CHEF

Yes. What I don't understand is how I physically get out of here.

GUNTHER

What are you all making such a big deal out of this for? Okay, so a few security forces showed up. Some trigger-happy soldier shot off a few rubber bullets. By mistake he hit our young employee. No, that's awful, I know. But where's the big tragedy? Get the white flags out and wave 'em Here, you want my kerchief?

HOT CHEF

I don't think she took a rubber bullet.

GUNTHER

What then? Speak up. No loaded pauses here. Say that awful word lurking behind your enigmatic expression. If not a rubber bullet, then what? Speak up. Go ahead, scare me.

HOT CHEF

A rock.

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ATTILA

In principle, this is where I should undergo a transformation. I should transform from a lazy young man into the terrible Attila the Hun. But there won't be any transformations. Because the evil old man with crooked legs and a shaved head – that's the Attila of your imagination. Cute little me – that's the Attila you are fated to meet. I realize it's difficult to believe that the State of Burgundy will be wiped off the map not by a hideous cannibal, but rather by a charming individual with a weakness for alcohol. Pour me a drink, by the way But get this through your heads: I have no desire to violate the rules of hygiene just in order to support your misconceptions about me. I will not eat dead bodies. For you this is all just a passing moment. For me it's my work. I have been in the service of the Great Master of the world since my early youth.

Beyond that – riddles. Beyond that – questions. The biggest question is what am I going to do with you? You see yourselves – Kriemhild insists on formally observing the laws of retribution. It is not my place to judge whether she is right (although she obviously is not). But as a newlywed I am in no position not to give in to her whim

So, wife, what shall we do? There are two essential choices – to avenge or not to avenge. Don't forget who I am. My capabilities, give or take a little, are limitless. So if you resolve to call off your eccentric demands, I can take on the practical side of things myself. There are endless possibilities. First, we can always write this off as if it were a common show played out in a theater. Second, we can call it someone's drunken meanderings and hallucinations. Third –

KRIEMHILD

Stop it. This earth was soaked with Siegfried's blood. Now it shall drink the blood of his assassins.

ATTILA

Where have you seen any earth here? I don't get it. I think this is called "linoleum". (*To those around him.*) I've done all I could, folks.

HOT CHEF

We appreciate the effort.

ATTILA

All right. Don't lose heart. You probably can guess that I prepared a few windfall benefits. You shall have your moped. The Copperpot sisters shall have a legion of husbands. Peter shall have back his daughter. But he'll have to die to have her. (*Pause.*) Huns! Are you prepared to storm?

*A roar goes up outside the doors.*

Nibelungs, are you ready?

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### GOOD and EVIL

YURY: So where this tradition - of speaking in allegory, in Aesopian language - is coming from in the Russian-language culture? Of not naming things by their names? The popular answer is that the permanent press of censorship forced artists to keep choosing this approach during the Soviet times...

MAKSYM: It's probably just fear. And often it's not just the fear of repressions, but also the fear of looking silly. The inhumanity of the existing system (or of the previous ones) is so obvious, that speaking openly and straightforwardly about its' inhumanity looks kind of stupid. So for the majority of the "progressive theater artists" here, any European or American journalist operating within the paradigm Good-Evil looks funny and stupid.

We don't say obvious things straightforwardly, because none of us wants to look naïve and silly, we all want to look jovial, ironical, cynical, all-knowing, all-understanding and accepting-everything; above-the-fray. But we should understand at some point, that such above-the-frayness is also just the manifestation of our fear, our hypocritical way of ethical survival...

YURY: So – just to make sure. Are you saying we should all go back to the basic paradigm of Good and Evil?

MAKSYM: Basically, yes, I think we should. I actually hope inside my plays I was functioning within this paradigm ... not in my real everyday life obviously... My plays have this moral undercurrent, which is often harmful to the quality of my texts, but I also believe quality of the text is not the most important thing for where we are now.

YURY: I feel you are saying something quite important. Something many of our American or European otherwise likeminded friends don't understand about us. So let me just repeat and rehash your words: Russian artists avoid straightforward talk about good and evil, because they are afraid to look stupid and naïve, and end up creating their works under a cynical, all-knowing, ethically uninvolved masks?

MAKSYM: And I'm also saying this is the survival strategy artists are forced into. Neither more nor less then. Only such strategy provides the possibility of social and career growth. One has to agree



to too many compromises to make it to the next level. And because none of us wants to agree to these compromises with a gloomy face, or to lose face, we had to work out a strategy of jovial way of losing our faces, and ended up in the land of cynicism.

We pretend we're looking at this life from the perspective of some above-the-fray almighty demigods, for whom all human ethical problems are dust and vanity. Now we have to abandon this illusion of almightiness, which is an interesting yet painful process; I personally didn't make too much progress on this path yet, but I'm trying hard. The first step is to learn how to say "no", and how to split up with people. I used to not have that skill, now I've learned it. All my upbringing, all my schooling, and all the survival experience of my forefathers taught me to always say "yes". I'm well and fully equipped to keep my mouth shut. My vitality is exactly the thing that doesn't let me write the really great and angry play, because somebody small in me knows too well I will be murdered for doing so.

It's some kind of an instinct I can't turn off; you know? I'd be glad to, but some biological program in me makes me write bad plays. And it's exactly the same biological program that kept my forefathers out of GULAG, and saved their lives. And this program is my shame.

YURY: I bet it's not only the fear of punishment, but also the fear of reality. I just directed a play in Russia, where one scene was of the documentary theater, and others were much more abstract, "theatrical". Rehearsing this particular documentary scene was a torture; actors were exhausted after every rehearsal; we all were pretty much losing our minds. I was asking actors and myself – why had it been so hard? And we all agreed – it happened because we all were (and are) deeply afraid of reality, so we prefer to escape into the "magic" theatrical worlds, and to ignore the sad truths actually surrounding us.

MAKSYM: It's the same fear. It's the fear of truth.

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## VODKA, FUCKING, AND TELEVISION 2003

*Translated by John J. Hanlon*

**Hero.** Listen. Do you remember the first lunar lander? That was 1970, the last year of the Sixties. That's when I was born. So strictly speaking I'm – a man of the Sixties. One of the last.

**Fucking.** Well so what. Why does that matter?

**Hero.** I don't know. It seems to matter. I feel that it does.

**Fucking.** And if someone were forming a team of financially insolvent toilet-cleaners, you'd rush to sign up for that too, right?

**Hero.** We were children during the Seventies. Now we're dangling between two self-satisfied generations, like an absurd pair of camel nuts. We are nobodies, we're nothing – we work in advertising and magazines, we're a bunch of archaic, spastic crabs. We're not entirely of this earth, although we'd like to be. Our sheets are not soiled with petroleum. But with the sperm of our wives' former lovers. We shake hands with our



Noel Gaullin and Adriene Mishler in 2012 Breaking String Theater production of VODKA, FUCKING, AND TELEVISION. Austin, Texas

friends who can't even get jobs in advertising. We like the smell of their palms. We lap up their blood. We could be, we should be in their place. But Boeing has now forbidden refueling with blood and stains. Only kerosene or faith. We didn't inherit enough of either. We're already nothing, we never existed. But we will. Only we will! Because without faith, without land and petroleum – we – are free. They can't buy us, we sell ourselves only for money. They'll compose legends about us. We are ancient fighting robots on a planet of plush disposable heiresses. We're only using 10 percent of the power of our computers. In our generation there are no lawyers. We – are a division of the SS "Little Prince"! We – are the chosen Brezhnevite Don Quixotes and hard-boiled eggs! We are free of any brand, style, morals, collective letters, editorials, shit-atorials, novelties and all the other shit. As in ancient times, as in the Stone Age, we are guided by simple gods – Vodka, Fucking and Television. We are knights without goals or dreams, our shoguns got fucked, on our banner – good old gonorrhea! We are galloping on well-maintained Toyotas into Eternity. We give hope to our species. Therefore there's no need to force me to say bad things about women.

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## GOGOL CENTER

YURY: Alright. The big thing we live under a pressure of for almost a year now – the Gogol Center case, or the "Seventh Studio" case to be precise. Why did they come after Serebrennikov, after Malobrodsky? We knew for a long time the repressive waive had to hit theater artists at some point. But why did they choose Gogol? Why now?



*The world movement in support of Kirill Serebrennikov and others accused in the Gogol Center Case. This one is on Stuttgart Opera House, Germany.*

MAKSYM: ...

YURY: I mean they came after Theater Doc before, but it was a different thing, a different tactic, there were no arrests involved...

MAKSYM: Because Theater Doc is not the total alternative to what authorities today consider to be the "right" way of making art. If we draw the line into future, Doc has its limitations. Some of the principles Doc is based on, are not letting it become "successful" in traditional understanding of this word...

YURY: You mean?...

MAKSYM: I mean, the moment Doc will become too successful, it won't be Doc anymore; so if such thing happens Doc will find a way to lose, to not win, to become unsuccessful again. Because it's created inside and for the "no-zone".

While Gogol Center doesn't have such a problem, nothing prevents it from becoming more and more important, more and more successful, from involving more and more people, from spreading its influence over broader and broader segments of population. They exist in the "yes-zone". Also it's not just theater anymore, it's also film – which means completely different audience numbers.

And this is when Gogol becomes a more dangerous alternative than Doc in the eyes of the authorities. You know, authorities today... it's mostly very young kids, breast-fed by all these fake personal-growth business-trainings... they are taught to eliminate each and any visible independent alternative.

We all know too well Gogol is financially “clean”. And authorities can’t afford influential cultural system to exist if it’s financially clean, because then such system becomes independent from the authorities... So they have to both eliminate Gogol, and to explain people these artists are thieves.

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## **COMMON VALUES**

**2008**

*Translated by John Freedman*

**COLONEL.** I am offering you an alliance.

**STUDENT.** An alliance?

**COLONEL.** Yes.

**STUDENT.** You mean like allies at war?

**COLONEL.** Yes. Like during the war. We must... No, wait. We have a common enemy. One who is capable of destroying everything we live for.

**STUDENT.** Are you sure we live for the same things?

**COLONEL.** I accept your sarcasm. It’s true that Ukrainian undercover agents are, to some extent, the heirs of the KGB...

**STUDENT.** Exactly!

**COLONEL.** But we aren’t the KGB. We are young. We still have ideals. And we are not yet weighted down beneath the burden of tragic errors... We are not yet cynics... We must, we are obligated to undertake the occasional nasty job. To violate the rights of a single individual for the sake of all mankind. This will be our gift. A gift from novice secret agents.

**STUDENT.** You’re a bad speechmaker.

**COLONEL.** This moron had the damn nerve to destroy his stories... We must stop him.

**STUDENT.** His name.

**COLONEL.** J.D. Salinger.

**STUDENT.** Ah... right... Is he still alive?

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## *MIKHAIL UGAROV THEATER DOC*

YURY: I don’t even know how to ask you about Ugarov, now when he passed away...

MAKSYM: Don’t yet know how to talk about him either. Can’t write anything...

YURY: Alright... Ugarov as the founder of Theater Doc... What was this new thing he did, Doc did, to give birth to the New Drama movement, to discover and help develop all these amazing playwrights? What was the point?



*Mikhail Ugarov 1956-2018*

MAKSYM: First of all, Misha made us all understand we didn't have to play old theatrical games; he has shown us why these games were harmful; he was our great liberator.

YURY: Which games specifically do you mean?

MAKSYM: Today it sounds too obvious probably. But there was this big game called "tradition" - there was no real tradition, but the game was there. When people hated something new or unusual, they used to say: "you are ruining the "tradition".

YURY: Tradition of...?

MAKSYM: Acting style, role of the director in theater, role of the playwright... He explained us we neither had to believe these traditions, nor we had to follow them.

Secondly, he was an amazing writer. So we all were respecting him professionally, which isn't always true when it comes to mentors. So we didn't have to forgive his bad writing for him building this theater for us all - I loved re-reading his works out of the pure professional pleasure. Reading them helped avoid familiar paths in writing of our own - this was liberation too, liberation from habitual.

To me personally he granted the illusion of the presence of "Over-the-Shoulder" - watching, registering, and understanding what I was doing; in him I've found my "Second" in the meaning of a double, of an attentive and critical mirror.

It may sound silly, but we - the post-Soviet people - feel comfortable thinking we are being watched (inspected? supervised?), that each word we say matters. It is a kind of reduced religiousness, something that for us substitutes the religion: feeling of being under watch, feeling that every word we say is registered and will be analyzed and evaluated at some point. On one hand it's catastrophic and it's horrible, and it's the "heritage of dark times", but on the other... it's also a delight - life feels bigger than your own small private thing, you feel a part of some bigger important process... And Misha for me was this "watching" person, he was my "Over-the-Shoulder".

He also had this acumen - he immediately knew who was artistically interesting, he had no respect to author's "position on theater market" at all; his thinking was independent from any formal hierarchy. And because of that he kept discovering new names. He knew in advance what will matter next year, next season; he knew how to read the future. And he kept moving forward, reinventing his strategies and methodically reinventing himself based on the changing real-time experience.



*Max and Misha*

Playwrights then (*Soviet and early after-Soviet times* - YU) were belittled by the part theaters were assigning to them; I personally felt like some vendor of semi-finished products... It took decades to even start protecting author's interests and artistic rights, which is especially important in the



beginning of the career... And Misha played the key part in changing this attitude. He secured playwright's right for the first play presentation, and for the first "mistake" ...

YURY: You mean readings at Theater Doc?

MAKSYM: Yes, certainly reading is just a first technical step... But playwrights now had a chance to present their first "mistakes" in public; "mistake" became the core, the most valuable thing...

YURY: Because these were not mistakes, but new ways of writing...



*Theater DOC*

MAKSYM: And Misha was ready to invest his years, and to develop these "mistakes" into styles.

YURY: As you say yourself – reading is just the first step. Didn't New Drama stick in it? Didn't it withdraw into this comfy shell of just-readings for the close circle of friends and colleagues?

MAKSYM: I don't think New Drama is a ghetto. We now have basic mechanisms letting new author become a thing, the system was changed. Now authors have principle instruments for protecting their texts, for the first presentations, for making second steps with theaters. The procedures are all quite transparent – all these contests and awards...

YURY: So now it's all up to theaters? It's about them being ready to make a new play part of their repertoires – it's their problem now?

MAKSYM: It's still author's problem obviously... but this is the world we live in, there is no other world for us...



YURY: I know Theater Doc means a lot to you, I know you've always considered it your home. Yet, for a foreigner reading your plays, it's a bit of a mystery – formally speaking they aren't "documentaries" at all. How so?

MAKSYM: Theater Doc is much bigger than documentary theater, it's not about the specific style at all, it fits many different voices. Verbatim technology was just the first necessary then step. Otherwise it's a universal theater providing space for the art that can't develop anywhere else. It's a genius "compensator" in the cultural field. When something is missing, Doc gives life to it.

For Doc it's both the mission, but also the curse on some level. People love labels, hieroglyphs – they want Doc to be documentary; people want precise definitions to help marketing. While Doc's mission is to deal with whatever is most complicated, most serious, most humanly and socially important (both thematically and stylistically) in the moment.

My work is actually too lighthearted for Doc.

*Yury laughs*

MAKSYM: It's true. Or at least it used to be true. Because most of Doc's authors didn't have what I used to have. I always had Kiev to escape to, so I never was as angry or sad as they were. But the moment I felt I could lose Kiev I went through the roof, and became same sad and angry as they have always been.

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## **The Market from Above**

**2008**

*Translated by John Freedman*

**WIFE.** What are you doing then?

**HUSBAND.** Compensating. It's probably a psychological process. You know I distrust the word "psychological," it's meaningless anymore. But language is the art of the possible. From the point of view of language some sort of reality still probably lurks behind the word "psychology." It doubtless says something about the brain and the human being. In any case, there's nothing more concise. So I use it. But it also occurs to me that I could describe it another way than with psychology. A sense of guilt, for example. It's just that it's too easy to describe everything using guilt complexes. I'm almost like a Catholic, only one that doesn't believe in God. It's so easy to say "I'm guilty" all the time because that's better than laying the blame on others... But I'm sick of playing the blame game and if I keep this up it will truly be a crime against good taste, you know? So I'm better off not explaining it by guilt... Because I forbid myself to be guilty anymore. If for no other reason than the aesthetics of it. As for compensation I'll tell you – there are people. And I'm supposed to be with them there right now in that town. For various reasons I can't be and they understand that, so there's nothing about them not being understanding or anything. They're fine people, I'll tell you. Immaculate. Really immaculate people, you wouldn't believe it. The fact I can't be there with them, that affects nothing. Nothing at all. Not our plans or anything... It's just that I'm not there with them. But they said it was really important for them for me to be there. When they found out I wasn't going to be there, they said they wanted me there with them anyway. So I'm there with them at least like this, on the internet. That's why I'm watching this square. Nothing's going on there now. Some stuff happened earlier and there were people there this evening – some concert or something. I couldn't tell. All I could see was the crowd. But now nothing's happening again. That street lamp is shining right in the camera and there's the town hall there, kind of like a cube. I love the Polish word "kubitski." I don't know if it means "cube" or not. That's what this one bar was called in Gdansk. This isn't Gdansk, though. This is Tarnov. I really don't know anything about the place. Except these people. I know them and they know Tarnov. They're really important people in my life

because we don't have much in common and I don't have anything in common with this town at all. It's just that I know them and they know me. And I want to be with them. But if I just say "I'm with you, guys," that wouldn't be true. If I sit and watch this square for a long time and then I say, "I'm with you, guys," that'll be true. Even though the words are exactly the same, "I'm with you, guys." So for my own sake, at least, I'm compensating for the fact that I'm not with them there. Something like that.

**WIFE.** You've been watching a long time.

**HUSBAND.** Yeah.

**WIFE.** Since morning.

**HUSBAND.** I've gotta do it 24 hours.

**WIFE.** Would have been easier to go there.

**HUSBAND.** No. And this is kind of cool, actually. See, look at these umbrellas over here. Only they're closed now. But there's something written on them. And look – somebody just passed through. Oops, that's all. He's gone.

**WIFE.** What were you planning to do with the people in this town?

**HUSBAND.** Drink. They're Poles. Almost all of them are Catholics.

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## NEW PLAYS AND NEW THEATER

YURY: I certainly wanted to talk to you about your attitude to the playwright/director balance in theater. Just to have a bit of a fight. You know how playwright-centered is American theater, and how director-centered is Russian...

MAKSYM: Yury, I really don't care anymore about Russian theater, I really don't care...

YURY: Alright, let's say European instead...

MAKSYM: What I really care about is that Ukrainian theater today is behind, we didn't even yet grow into having this problem here. It probably will be the best if we jump right into the kind of theater where playwright is same important as in the US, while I understand even there it's a sham almightiness...

YURY: We know too well over 90% of theaters' repertoire here are classical plays. Why are we so afraid of new texts? What makes us prefer reinventing old texts to opening new ones? What's this syndrome?

MAKSYM: It's probably the comfort-syndrome. I believe deep inside we all know why we initially chose to do art – it was about eternal reinvention of ourselves, about making super-risky choices, it was about braking rules and letting ourselves fell down...

YURY: Because this is the only way to keep walking? To make a step forward means to let your body start falling down?

MAKSYM: And then you have to start moving your legs, and maybe you will even start running. Institutions never support such risky choices, so one has to do it on his own expense, on the expense of his family too.

I was reading Les Kurbas (*famous Ukrainian film and theater director - YU*) yesterday. He is writing about the difference between the School and the Studio. One can finish School, graduate from it; but one can't graduate from the Studio – it's the process of permanent learning. Work at Studio never ends, there is no triumphal final moment; next day after you reach the result, you need to start over, to clean the polyps off your artistic body.

YURY: Okay, so partially this is about comfort. And probably about director's ambition: now when author is dead, director is the author. Yet, I deeply believe interpretation is inevitable.

MAKSYM: Obviously.

YURY: So what's the right proportion? How do we interpret new texts on stage?

MAKSYM: My dream would be to form a new tradition, a new culture of express-interpretation. I would love readings to grow into the new level and to become these express-productions of poor theater, where actors don't read of the page anymore, but know the lines by heart.

YURY: And that's it?

MAKSYM: Yes. What if such productions become a new norm, a new workhorse of the theater?

YURY: Well, this is what American theater is today. Mostly.

MAKSYM: And this is great. We all here (*in Ukraine, in Russia – YU*) are too much of inventors, of fantasts.

I believe in word, I believe in text, even if such statement doesn't feel contemporary enough. I'm betting on this blown horse, even though its fur looks horrible and its heels are badly damaged.

I dream of the theater of perfect dialogues, of perfect talking and hearing. About these moments on stage when actor is truly hearing his partners' words, and is being changed by them, and when the quality of his next line is affected by such hearing.

Then, I believe, in theater we have a chance to lay a finger on, to trap a new meaning, a new condition, a new moment of time. Not all combinations of words have been used yet, not all perspectives and viewpoints were explored.

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**Dulcey and Roxy at City Hall**  
**2013**  
**A play for the theater of mathematical bullshit**

*Translated by John Freedman*

**Vadim**

Catastrophe, yes... I don't say, "The Catastrophe." But the sensation of catastrophe, yeah, I say that. Suffocation. De-motivation. All those things.

**Sean**

That's not very specific.

**Vadim**

All right. I already promised that I would say a little more about myself. But from this moment on this isn't about about you at all. It is about me. Let me describe one specific day. It starts out all right. Like any of my other days, except for the bad ones. Then it starts going wrong. The Pan-Russian People's Front of Russia held its convention in Nuremberg. A small band attacked gays on Moscow's main drag. They doused them with urine and mocked him with stupid, dangerous, underage girls. Misha's friend broke a leg and my daughter was bit by a tick. Suddenly I saw everything clearly from on high, as if from a military satellite. I understood what people are worth. I sensed their plans and their disillusionments. Beyond that - nothing. Later I realized that soon the Pan Russian People's Front would be everywhere and they would be out there beating up gays and that the vice would squeeze us all and –



*Noel Gaulin in in 2014 Breaking String Theater production of  
DULCEY AND ROXY AT CITY HALL. Austin,  
Texas*

**Dulcey**

Friends will start breaking legs.

**Vadim**

Exactly! Dulcey! You got it on the nose! Friends will start breaking legs. It's unbearable!

**Sean**

What's that have to do with us?

**Vadim**

Technically speaking it doesn't... You guys already hit your ceiling with your "Keep Our City Weird."

**Sean**

I agree. It's rather pretentious.

**Paul**

I haven't been able to listen to that for ten years.

**Vadim**

I agree. It grates on the nerves.

**Sean**

Yep.

**Paul**

Yep.

**Vadim**

And yet there's something to it. That's why I bought a plane ticket and came here to prepare you... So you wouldn't let down your guard. So that you wouldn't think that vices only squeeze somewhere far across some ocean.

Sean

Vadim. Are you a naïve person?

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### WHY THEATER IS STILL IMPORTANT?

YURY: In the end I ask everybody the same question. It's a bit of a joke, but it's not. Why theater is so much more important here than in the US? As a cultural institution, as a social institution? Directors are being sent to prison, demonstrations and public protest are happening. Why people care?

MAKSYM: 20 years ago I would have answered this question without batting an eye. Misha since taught me to be more careful and thoughtful about such things... Yet now when he's not watching anymore, and he can't scold...

YURY: Yeah, now we can throw aside all restraints...

MAKSYM: Well... Probably the audiences of the killing, bloody times choose theater over film as a permission to feel alive... Probably Americans just don't need such permission... Probably we don't feel alive enough while on our own... Probably we secretly hope that one of these performances will change us profoundly, will grant us new meaning...

YURY: Let's hope.

## ON GOGOL CENTER/SEVENTH STUDIO CASE

The night before the court session described in detail below, the annual Golden Mask National Award Ceremony took place at Bolshoi Theater in Moscow; two nights later – next day after events in court - ceremony was aired on the national TV, surprisingly with no cuts or edits.

I'm deeply grateful to the Golden Mask and many theater artists, who helped turn the ceremony into stand of solidarity with Kirill, Alexei, Sophia, and Yuri. The Moscow Times reports: *Serebrennikov received the best opera director award for "Chaadsky," while Alla Demidova was awarded best actress award for her performance in Serebrennikov's production "Akhatova: Poem without a Hero."* Gogol Center, the theater that Serebrennikov still officially heads, was awarded a special jury prize "for creating a space of creative freedom, and a bold search for the language of contemporary theater." [Here's the link to the full article.](#)

On top of receiving 3 Masks, Kirill's name was mentioned by almost every artist receiving award as well as by the Festival Director **Maria Revyakina**: "There is no doubt that all of them, Kirill Serebrennikov, Sofia Apfelbaum, Yuri Itin, and Alexei Malobrodsky, are wonderful professionals. We wish them the opportunity to work freely", and Festival Chairman **Alexei Bartoshevich**: "We all believe that this injustice will be corrected and they will be with us here, free. Let's wish them to get their freedom soon."

Director **Yury Butusov** named what had been happening to Alexei Malobrodski a "refined torture", and was appealing to the court from stage directly: "Respected judges... let him go home! Let him go home!"

Famous **Leo Dodin**, the Artistic Director of the Maliy Drama Theater – Theater of Europe said: "I hope truth will prevail... One poem says – the truth always prevails, but always prevails afterwards. I hope to see them all at the next Golden Mask. The world is insane right now, and can explode at any moment. Theater has to remember that, talk and scream about it."



One of the matriarchs of the Russian stage, actress **Alla Demidova**: *“I remember theater to be the tribune for social change, I remember theater which was forming social opinion and taste. How did we lose it?... Now the mob forms opinions in the internet, they call us clowns and fools. They let us play our games as long as we don’t kick up a fuss, but if we do – they corner us. And such corner is now called house arrest.”*

**And here comes the sweet part.**

**With no respect to the opinion of the leading figures of Russian culture,  
The Ministry of Culture of Russian Federation next day sends the official letter  
to Basmany Court ASKING to extend pre-trial restrictions for all the accused.**

I must say the coverage of this case in independent media/internet becomes more and more professional with every next session in court. This time I couldn’t be there but followed the report on-line by Catherina Gordeeva. She was typing so fast I could hardly follow her reading. I understand it’s mostly her work that later same day formed the basis of the material in the link below.

[Medium.com also managed to translate 90% of it into English immediately.](#) They also are publishing brilliant and optimistic photos of all accused, while they don’t name the photographer. Stunning fast work. If you want to truly feel the atmosphere in this court, please spend 30 minutes reading it. If not – I chose some highlights, things which for various reasons stroke me.



*Kirill Serebrennikov*



*Alexey Malobrodsky*

**14.58** The bailiff yelled across the whole corridor: “There will now be a convoy with a dog, they will lead Malobrodsky in!” Our entire crowd chanted “Alexey!” Alexey Malobrodsky was led into the courtroom (no dog though!) to an ovation. There’s an insane congestion in the corridor.

**15.24** The Judge asks Malobrodsky to introduce himself. When he says that he is an Israeli citizen, the judge clarifies: is it the Republic of Israel or the State of Israel? Malobrodsky: The State of Israel. There is such a country, your honor.

**15.39** The bailiff’s phone rings. The ringtone is Vivaldi’s “seasons”. “February”, to be more precise.

**16.28** Ksenia Karpinskaya also asks to file the decision of the European Court of Justice stating that the detention of Alexey Malobrodskyi is illegal, as well as medical reports of deteriorating health and vision loss.

**16.53** Alexey Malobrodsky: “All this time, I’ve been deprived of information regarding the magnitude of the case. It was only today that I have finally heard it for the first time: “258 volumes”.

**16.59** Alexey Malobrodsky recalls how the investigator would come and bring the case files for him to read for 15–20 minutes only, explaining that it was not permitted to bring more than three volumes at a time because it would be hard to carry them.

**17.08** Kirill Serebrennikov speaking:

...there are no witnesses of this alleged crime; however, there are more than enough witnesses of the “Platforma” project itself—by the most conservative estimates there were more than 650 participants in the project—performers, artists, technicians and administrative staff. Events that were part of the project have been attended by more than 80 thousand people over the course of 3 years and 3 months...

... “Platforma” sold 30 845 tickets to the sum of 10 607 232 rubles....

...And more than 50 thousand people attended the free events of the “Platforma” project.

...Investigators have at their disposal a letter signed by the Deputy Minister of culture Aristarkhov on May 19, 2014. Here is what he reported to the office of the Government of the RF: “...Throughout its existence, the “Platform” project has received wide public acclaim and high reviews from the professional community, has become well-known in Moscow and has been recognized abroad. Creative projects of “Platform” have repeatedly become nominees and winners of the national theatre award “Golden mask”.

From the case materials, I found out that on 14 July 2014, the acting Minister of Culture Ivliev sent the Deputy Prime Minister Olga Golodets the following letter: “...The artistic and organizational principles introduced at the Platform are now practiced by many state institutions and independent associations in the field of culture. Thus, the main targets set by the initiators of the project can be deemed achieved”.

...I am very proud of my team—for the theatre “Gogol center”, “the Seventh Studio”, which brilliantly completed a tour in Berlin with such great a success with both viewers and critics—this is an important achievement of the Russian theatre.

...I am incredibly grateful to my film group, who in these insane circumstances were able to help me finish the work on the film “Summer”, which will now represent Russia in Cannes.

...I wholeheartedly thank my close friends for their participation in my destiny, I love you very much...but the main words I want to say to my 84-year-old father: Dad, I am proud of you and your courage. Please, wait for me.”

**17.19** Kirill managed to finish the speech without crying. Half the courtroom cried. And from the corridor, you could clearly hear an ovation which lasted for a few minutes. The bailiff began to rush: “who started it? Who was the first to clap”

**18.03** Kirill Serebrennikov’s attorney Kharitonov on stand:

...Investigation claims that the finance plans that were submitted to Ministry of Culture allegedly contained inflated numbers on types of cost of planned events; however, does not name a single event, the cost of which was inflated or which did not take place. Investigation cannot actually do that because all planned events took place.

...The investigation alleges that more than 133 million rubles of the allocated 216 (*were stolen* - YU)... If 133 were stolen, and 60 paid to employees of the Seventh Studio, then how did we carry out the projects?

...The defense confirms that more than 130 guarantees of famous cultural and art figures of Russia for Serebrennikov remain in force.

**18.20** Investigator Terekhin and prosecutor **Ivanter** spoke each for about 15 seconds: “please satisfy the request”. And no arguments. It seems that even Karpov was stunned by this apathy. And, before proceeding to listing the admitted documents, “froze” for a minute or two.

**18.28** A few words about judge Arthur Karpov:

...In 2011–2013, he declined the complaints from Sergey Magnitsky’s mother and colleague regarding the illegal posthumous prosecution and the inaction in the investigation of the circumstances of Magnitsky’s death. In 2012–2016, the judge repeatedly issued orders to arrest and extend the terms of arrest for the defendants in the “Bolotnaya case” ... In February, 2014, he changed Alexey Navalny’s measure of restraint from recognizance not to leave to house arrest... In February 2015, Artur Karpov extended the arrest of Ukrainian pilot Nadezhda Savchenko. In June 2016, he authorized the arrest of Kirov region Governor Nikita Belykh. ...In addition, in November 2016 he announced the measures of restriction for Alexei Ulyukayev. In other words, an honorable person.

*I’m afraid there will be more to follow...*

*Yury*

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**RUSSIAN NOTEBOOK**

**#5 May 2018**

**WRITER:**

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**OUR THANKS TO:**



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