



RUSSIAN NOTEBOOK '17-'18

from Yury Urnov

1 9/17

7 September 17

Dear Friends,

Here is our first issue of a new, monthly CITD e-publication, *Russian Notebook*.

When we were developing the *Notebook* with Yuri in early summer, we had no idea the global cultural headlines would be filled with scandals around the Gogol Center: the arrests of its artistic director Kirill Serebrennikov and managing director Alexei Malobrodsky.

Our long-time partner, John Freedman, has been an invaluable source in getting information out to the English-speaking profession through his FB posts and his website (jfreed16.sixsite.com). He sent me his translation of Alexei speaking out in the courtroom earlier in the day yesterday.

The *Notebook* proposes to look at what is going on in the Russian theatre today through in-depth interviews with key players (many old friends of mine, Yuri and CITD). To dig deeper and wider—beyond headlines.

So we begin with Elena Kovalskaya and the Meyerhold Centre in Moscow.

Elena Kovalskaya is a force! I've known her for over two decades—as a critic, journalist, editor, festival director, and instigator of artist-focused projects. The real Elena jumps off the pages of this great conversation with her friend Yuri.

And now, as the Art Director of the Meyerhold Centre in Moscow and the partner of Viktor Ryzhakov, she is leading a theatre with huge reach both inside and outside of Russia.

Enjoy the ride, folks.

And a word or two about Yuri (I have been using this spelling since I first started working with him in 2003—even my spell-check insists on this spelling). Yuri has worked with every US delegation CITD brought to Russia for Golden Mask. New Drama, and Contemporary Dance Festivals in Moscow, and various gatherings in St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Kostroma, and Vladikavkaz. He was with us in Uganda during CITD's East African work, leading directing workshops. In 2009, he joined John Freedman as a full CITD partner in the development of the Russian New Drama project, as a Fulbright Scholar hosted by our institutional partner, Towson University.

Since then, he's put together an enviable record of directing here in the US: Austin (Salvage Vanguard Theatre), San Francisco (Cutting Ball Theatre), Telluride (New Drama Festival), Baltimore (Single Carrot Theatre, ACME-Corporation), and Washington, DC (Forum Theatre, University of Maryland, and Woolly Mammoth, where he became a company member).

The *Russian Notebook* joins two other CITD e-publications:

- [The Hungarian Letter of News](#): a collaboration with a team from Budapest's *Szinhaz* Magazine, bi-monthly. Look for the next issue in early October. (And we can announce that we will continue publishing through calendar 2018!)
- [DISPATCHES](#): An occasional report on festivals and gatherings, with an emphasis on new work from Eastern Europe. The next issue on the 2017 TEZST Festival in Timisoara, Romania and reported by Michael Dove (artistic director of the Forum Theatre) should be published in mid-October.

I'll be missing the first month of our new season in the US—I'm headed to Budapest for two weeks, with a juicy program of new productions and some work on multiple projects with our Hungarian partners. I'll then be with Włodzimierz Staniewski and his company Gardzlenice for their 40th Anniversary Festival, followed by my first visit to Estonia (Tallinn and Narva), working with Yuri and Märt Meos on a new project (under wraps at the moment). And, finally returning to Timisoara for talks with long-time friend Chris Torch, who is the artistic director for Timisoara 2021 European Cultural Capital.

I continue to find both inspiration and strength from our colleagues in the region. In

these dark dark times, they manage to keep a steady focus on the work. And they collectively give me hope.

Best to all as we begin again,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Philip Arnoult', written in a cursive style.

Philip Arnoult
founder & director



RUSSIAN NOTEBOOK '17-'18

from Yury Urnov

1

9/17

Dear Friends,

With this issue, I'm beginning my year-long journey to Russia. I will be spending a lot of time in Moscow, but will also be travelling to St Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, Krasnoyarsk, Penza, and other places.

My plan is to do 10 issues of this newsletter and to publish them approximately once a month. In the center of every issue will be an interview with one Russian theater professional: a playwright, a director, a critic, or a manager.

Most of them are affiliated either with the theater or with the festival I'm interested in. So during each given month, I will only be attending productions of the theater or festival I am profiling, providing you with short reports on these events as well as with photos and video links. This way, I hope to introduce you both to the individuals and the institutions of Russian theater.



In the interviews, I will be asking questions that I believe may interest you about Russian theater, from broad inquiries like, “Why is theatre still so important in Russia?” and, “How does artistic freedom combine with State funding?” to the much more particular – about budgets, or even more individual philosophies – and about the Russian society in general.

In the end of the day, I wish these 10 issues to form something like Yury's collage of theater in Russia of 2017-2018. It will be highly subjective, very post-modernistic, and hopefully informative and fun.

I'm very glad I'm doing it right now, because I feel like Russian theater today is at the point of its highest in the last few decades of blooming, but also at the moment of a new crisis provoked by the severing political atmosphere in my country. So I will also reserve a small section in the end of each issue to weigh in on events in the theatre world which I won't be able to shy away from.

I hope this to be a two-way traffic, so **please write me back** if you want to hear more about any stuff I will be writing about.

This notebook could only happen with both support and guidance of Philip Arnoult and tons of editorial work by the CITD staff. Most of you will know that Philip is pretty much singlehandedly providing dialogue between American and Russian theaters today, and however crazy it sounds, I'm afraid it's true. I deeply appreciate his efforts on this front, I truly believe we have to make our cultures talk to each other much more than they do now, and I'm sure we can do it way better than our Presidents.

Let's have a fun year together!

Yury in Moscow, 2017

ABOUT THE MEYERHOLD CENTRE OF MOSCOW & ELENA KOVALSKAYA

The Meyerhold Theatre Centre appeared as an organization in 1991 and the current building was finished in 2000.

One of the leading Russian theater directors Valery Fokin, the headliner of one of my future issues, was at the helm of the Meyerhold since the very first day. The name of Vsevolod Meyerhold even during the late Soviet years was under partial ban, so the idea was to create cultural institution commemorating his name, exploring his heritage, and developing his theatrical inventions in the context of the modern era.

In 2013, Fokin moved on to St. Petersburg to head the legendary Alexandrinsky Theatre, and the new leadership duet of the Artistic Director Viktor Ryzhakov and the Art Director Elena Kovalskaya took over the place.



Elena Kovalskaya is my personal hero and the protagonist of the first issue of this notebook.

After graduation from GITIS, she started her career in 1999 as a theater columnist of the then superhot *Afisha Magazine* (the Russian analog of *Time Out*), and quickly grew into one of the top Russian theatre critics. In 2006, she also took over *Lubimovka New Writing Festival*, the first and still the most important annual event for playwrights in Russia. She headed it for 6 years and became the most prominent supporter and promoter of the New Drama

movement in the country. In 2012 at the Meyerhold's she created *The Future Theater Leaders School*, an educational initiative intended to bring up the new-thinking generation of professional artistic and managing directors.

Elena is also a permanent jury member of the *National Golden Mask Festival* and often a curator of the *Russian Case*, so those who visited Moscow through CITD in early Aprils are already partially familiar with her aesthetical taste.

FOUR MAIN PROGRAMMING PRIORITIES

The Meyerhold Theatre Centre under Kovalskaya's and Ryzhakov's leadership announced the four main programming priorities. These priorities fill all its architectural spaces with an experimental vibe:



Four fully funded *interdisciplinary productions* a year on the Centre's Main Stage. An opportunity open for creative groups around town and selected competitively.



Productions based on *new plays* in the Small black-box theater.



Theatre *for children* to be performed anywhere in the Centre.



Paratheatrical experiences: 'playback', improvisational, stand-up theater, etc. performed in the Centre's Cafeteria.

INTERVIEW WITH ELENA KOVALSKAYA

The Importance of Theatre in Russia

YURY: So we are sitting here talking next day after Alexey Malobrodsky, the former managing director of *The Gogol Centre*, was arrested for obviously political reasons. So - why? Why anybody even cares about theater here? Why is it so important in Russia? Where is this growing from?

ELENA: It's growing from 1920's. They were building the new country, the new society, and theater was chosen by the authorities as a place for the new nation to be formed. People of different social classes met in theater, and the new behavioral standards, new social role-models were implanted into their brains by the means of the dramatic art. Soviets took this old conflict between the honor and the duty, and were indoctrinating the idea of supremacy of the collective over the individual through theater.

When they were creating the new infrastructure, the government buildings, the court, and the theater were placed on the same city-squares next to each other, and that's where they still stand. Not modernistic or constructivist, but the new-classicistic, Comedie-Francaise-like buildings with columns were erected in every city, in every shit-hole.

"Imagine: such a building stands high up on a hill, the citizen walks up to it, shakes the dust off his feet, and there studies new values, new sense, and new law."

YURY: Did anything change with the beginning of Perestroika?

ELENA: Yes, the social status of theater collapsed then. Theater was trying to reprocess the then contemporary social agenda but was failing in it; changes were happening too fast. So most of theater people thought: 'fuck the contemporary agenda! Let's better be a place one can escape reality in'.

YURY: So theater couldn't keep up with the speed reality was changing in the 90's. Did it finally catch up now?

ELENA: It didn't. But the reality, the life itself stopped changing. Society is in stagnation, so there is an illusion theater finally caught up with it.

YURY: Tell me, if we're looking at the classical Russian conflict 'Artist vs Tsar' – how is it developing within this new reality? We saw a lot of it in the Soviet years...

ELENA: Yes we had it in the Soviet years, and now we have it again. It appeared again in 2010's. Before this time the authorities didn't have a need, intention, or - most importantly – didn't have mechanisms of control over an artist. In 2010's this has changed; at least in theater it did. What we see happening with Malobrodsky now is the form of pressure through criminal indictment, based on supposedly economic reasons, while in reality the reasons are political. Look at the Khodorkovsky case – same thing – a political case presented publicly as a fraud.

*With Kovalskaya as the Art-Director, Meyerhold Centre shows a lot of support to new writing, and holds annual **New Drama Festival**. The Centre sponsors readings, work-in-progresses, and full productions based on the recent Russian plays.*

At least three of the productions attracted my interest this year.



Olympia (Olga Mukhina) Dir Pavel Danilov, Meyerhold Center, Moscow, 2017

The long-expected return of **Olga Mukhina** into the big game with her play "**Olympia**". First staged by the Fomenko Theatre, it receives the second production with the group of the newly-graduated Moscow Art Theater School students. Olga's play is a sort of fast-forwarded history of new Russia from Olympics to Olympics, from 1980 (Moscow) to 2012 (Sochi) through the eyes of two families. The fact that the play was produced by the youngest Russian artists (*director - Pavel Danilov*) adds a layer of generational interpretation to the piece - it's fun to see the gap in Mukhina's and Danilov's perception of the country's history. [More photos here.](#)



Black Box (Pavel Pryazhko) Dir Nikita Betekhtin, Meyerhold Center, Moscow, 2017

Another big name in the New Drama movement is **Pavel Pryazhko** (actually from Belarus). His recent play "**Black Box**", directed by *Nikita Betekhtin*, happens in 2016 and in 1986 simultaneously. The characters are lost and not sure in which year they actually live, which reads as a clear statement from the author: we are now reliving the late Soviet Era on the new turn of the historical spiral. Pavel - arguably the leading playwright of the Russian post-dramatic theater - builds his work out of 308 questions characters ask each other and themselves; questions only. [More photos here.](#)



SIRI (Natalia Zaitseva) Dir Alexey Kuzmin-Tarasov, Meyerhold Center, Moscow, 2017

The third play is written by a debutant **Natalia Zaitseva**, and directed by *Alexey Kuzmin-Tarasov*. Natalia makes intelligent personal assistant **SIRI** the main character of her homonymous play, performed in the production by a young actress of the American descent (*Jordan Frai*). Siri is successfully resolving problems of the human love-triangular, and convinces one of the characters to take a new generation Siri-pill, expected to control human life even better than the electronic version. [Video-teaser here.](#)

The Post-Soviet Theatre

YURY: What's new in the Post-Soviet theater if we compare it to the Soviet one?

ELENA: Right after Perestroika came a generation of intellectuals, of artistic aristocrats; they despised the audience. They were rediscovering the Russian historical avant-garde, and the contemporary European drama, as well as the European avant-garde - everything that used to be non-normative in the Soviet Union.

YURY: You mean, like Anatoly Vasiliev?

ELENA: No, I don't mean Vasiliev, I'm talking about his students and other artists of their generation: Mirzoev, Klim, Yukhananov, Kosmachev, Kisilev, and Milgram. Vasiliev himself is the Soviet artist. Let's say, they bloomed beautifully but they withered soon. Each of them did one important production, but these were so extremely "esoteric" that everyone was like: 'oh, no-no, fuck that...'

"Then the New Drama became the next alternative. These guys were hongweibings, naturals, hooligans, and goons."

With a couple exclusions the New Drama artists were all "commoners"; they didn't emerge from the bigger body of culture to form an opposition to it. They were clean sheets, tabula rasa; they started doing theater as if nobody did it before them. Yet very soon the leading Moscow headhunters - like Oleg Tabakov (*Moscow Art Theatre Artistic Director -Y.U.*) - came after them. Director Kirill Serebrennikov, playwrights Vassily Sigarev and Presnyakov brothers, they all are coming from this pool.

They brought new audiences to theaters, and these audiences were not escapist, they wanted to talk about here and now.

YURY: So we named 'elitists', we named 'marginals'... Where does Theatre.doc belong?

ELENA: Certainly to marginals...

YURY: By putting them into the same pot with New Drama people are you saying there is no stylistic difference between the documentary play and the regular contemporary play in Russia?

ELENA: At least I'm saying Theatre.doc set the direction for New Drama, set the goal for it. Which is to get as close as possible to the reality, to reflect it in the most precise way, and to become a piece of tracing paper for it.

YURY: Are we missing anything? Maybe some socially proactive theater, like the one I've seen at the Meyerhold (*see below*)?

ELENA: Mostly we're trying to catch up with our European colleagues in this field. But here's what I find important: artists who are working in the socially proactive theater today, who are working with handicapped, with homeless, with youngsters or amateurs, - it's not just their civic-mindedness, they are also seeing a resource for their artistic development in it. And today, in the times of the conservative turn in politics, this particular kind of theater seems to be invulnerable for the conservative criticism. Such kind of theater is irreproachable, it's airtight.

YURY: Yep, it's disarming, right?

ELENA: Like I was a member of this last Golden Mask jury, when the Ministry of Culture forced us to include some of their experts - super-conservative, horrible people... I was forcing the Ministry's

main agent on this jury Capitoline Koksheneva to at least go see the New Drama productions. I was telling her 'these are the only artists who are dealing with the problems of the lower Russian class today, nobody else does!' So she had to go see these works, she had to go watch handicapped perform, she was suffering, yet she went and she saw it. Later she was saying: "it wasn't The Art".

*Meyerhold Center develops partnership with the "Equal Possibilities" organization and their integrated **Theater-Studio "Circle II" for mentally disabled performers.** In their new production, **"Beyond the Rhythm"** directed by Andrey Afonin actors explore rhythms of the nature, of the color, of the verbal dialogue. It's probably the only place in Moscow now where regular audiences can see work of disabled theater artists performing in the professional environment. [More pictures and video teaser here.](#)*



Beyond the Rhythm. Devised and directed by Andrey Afonin, Theater-Studio "Circle II" and Meyerhold Center, Moscow, 2017

Government Funding and the Responsibility of the Artist

YURY: I have to ask this question about the government funding of theaters. Why do they keep funding us? This particular government, here and now? Just a tradition?

ELENA: Right after Perestroika everything went on market and government kept subsidizing only few sectors, like public transportation, like postal service, like theater – this kind of crap. It only was 2% of their budget, so they decided to keep funding it. And we should thank our government for that. In early 90's audiences needed theater as a place to escape reality, they filled the seats. Also, a lot of media personalities were working in theaters, so for the government to save face they had to keep supporting us. Because these celebrities... we're talking about people with enormous nation-wide reputations. Even as late as in 2012 Kapkov (*former Moscow Minister of Culture – Y.U.*) was telling me: 'I can't get rid of this guy, he'll go to the Red Square and will commit self-immolation, and the story will be on everyone's lips with me to blame.'

YURY: So you think when this elder generation of celebs passes away the situation will change?

ELENA: We run the *Future Theater Leaders School* at the Meyerhold Center, and we discuss it there. To keep our financial freedom we have to explain our government why they need us. And the answer is

-

"They need us because we're creating social trust in the country where there is no social trust at all."

We're doing the work for this society nobody else does. As long as theater has an articulated social mission, it will be hard to ignore.

YURY: Alright, how about funding of the regional theaters – it's not like many of them are doing these socially proactive projects like you do, neither they have celebrities performing on stage?

ELENA: Look here. I'm travelling a lot around the country. Here's an example from Komsomolsk-on-Amur. The city with a huge gap between the rich and the poor, with the half-dead fish-factories... with rotten ships. Very few roads and bad ones with only Japanese right-hand drive 4x4's in the streets. Too far from Moscow - it's really a different country with really severe living conditions. So I'm going to the theater there. It's erected on the main Lenin Square, next to the government offices, next to the court, next to the sea – all in one place. And I'm seeing people, the audience. Women are wearing hand-tailored dresses - no fucking jersey shorts. Men and teen-agers wear suits. Younger women all went and set their hair before they came to see the show. The coolest cake-shop of the region serves their sweets in the theater, like they are catering it. Huge lobby, huge chandeliers, a 30-minute long intermission with good coffee, expensive cognac, and the Michelin Cuisine pastries. Where else in the region these people can wear this kind of clothes, have this experience? They belong to different social-groups, and going to theater for them is like the social bar, like the measure of their social dignity: once a year you have to buy or make a dress, to set your hair, and to prove yourself you are a human being. Once a year. So watching these people, and with all my love to the New Drama, I thought: 'fuck the New Drama here'. *Here* they should keep putting up *The Marriage of Figaro*, serving champagne in the intermission... They should keep putting up classical comedy, with probably a few contemporary elements... When they go to the movies there they buy pop-corn; where else but in theater they can establish their dignity? And theater there understands its social mission, and helps this huge social group to find self-respect.

YURY: Well this sounds kind of disarming... So you are saying there is no place there for, let's say, aesthetic or political provocation?

ELENA: There should be another theater in this city, a smaller one, a very different one, probably an independent one, privately funded by the people understanding the need of alternative. And it has to happen in the basement, or in the attic - this different socio-critical kind of theater. The bigger one will keep serving 100% of the audiences, while the new small one will only serve 5 or 10%.

YURY: How do different theaters deal with a dilemma 'government-money vs freedom of speech', and how people think about it? Whose money are we spending? Does the expression "he that is paying for the girl's dinner will be the one dancing her later in the evening"?

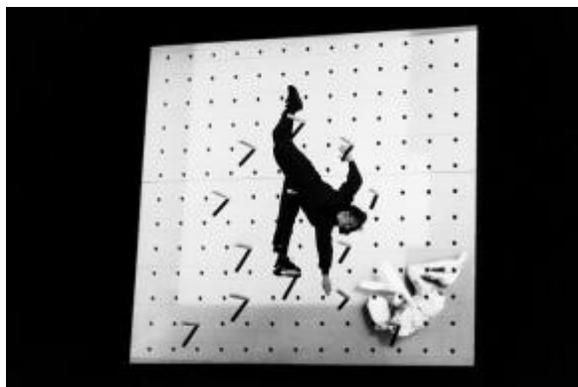
ELENA: Let's look at that from the audience's point of view instead. In Russia the employer is paying taxes for the employee, so a lot of people don't even know what their salaries are, and how much taxes are being withheld. So they don't feel the way tax-payers do, and the idea of the responsibility of the government sounds quite abstract to them. For these people government still is some kind of sacred shit. They don't think of it as of the housekeeping management or as of the plumber we call when we need to fix something. So the artist-government conflict works the same way as it did in the good old Soviet times. There is this sacred power gizmo, and we all are indebted to it...

Only 14% of the population believes that the government owes them, while the rest of the Putin's 86% - they are grateful for their salary, that they believe people in power positions are paying out of their own pockets.

Same with theaters: people believe that authorities own the money and give it as a present to the irresponsibly spending theater-idiots. So when audiences come and see the show they don't like, they blame theater-idiots for spending sacred government's money. They don't even realize it's their own, populations' money theaters are spending; neither they realize they are paying twice – first time by paying taxes, and second time when they buy tickets.

YURY: Which means we first need to build healthy relationships and understanding in the triangular: population-authorities-artists... Alright, but what about artists themselves? Is there a problem there? I'm taking money from your hands, but I'm going to use them to do what I want to do.

ELENA: Most of artists in Russia share the same attitude to the government as the rest of the population...



Body of Avant-Garde. Devised and directed by Dmitry Filippov, Meyerhold Center, Moscow, 2017

The Centre is working hard on the still alien for Russia idea of the 'open stage space'. Unlike pretty much any other

theater in Moscow they don't have their own company of actors or directors, so creative groups from around town can apply for project funding and support. The contest is being held annually, and 4 winners produce their works on the Centre's main stage, forming its core repertoire.

*I only had a chance to see one of the four this year. **"Body of Avant-garde"** directed by **Dmitry Filippov** perfectly fits both the physical space of the Center and its mission to explore and promote artistic heritage of Vsevolod Meyerhold. The mixed ensemble of drama, physical, and circus actors in this multidisciplinary production is reconstructing, criticizing, enjoying and partially making fun of the limitations Meyerhold's biomechanics and similar techniques dictate human body. The performance collage is contextualized by the documentary video recordings of Joseph Stalin and other leaders of the early Soviet Republic. The director is clearly drawing parallels between what was happening in Russian art and in Russian politics at this time, and is discovering the rhyming patterns of totalitarianism in both.*

[Pics and video teaser here.](#)



Body of Avant-Garde. Devised and directed by Dmitry Filippov, Meyerhold Center, Moscow, 2017

Complicated Theatre-language

YURY: Let's move to the next chapter then. It seems to me for the American artist the aesthetical risk is bigger than the political one. When it comes down to breaking out of the linear narrative structure, or to the metaphorical visual language – the risk with the audiences is very high. People just say: 'I don't understand'; like there is this specific gland in the organism which only gets satisfied by 'understanding'. So how does this work in Russian theater? I've been witnessing audiences being very patient when watching complicated productions on stage. What is it? Being trained to read complicated visual texts? Or they just pretend they do understand because it makes them look like "cultured" people?

ELENA: Well, speaking of the New Drama, there was no theatrical complicatedness in it to begin with. Yes, the unusual form, the unusual acting method, but one can get used to it pretty quickly. While I believe the complicatedness you're talking about – like Valery Fokin's or Kama Ginkas'es complicatedness of the directorial form, or complicatedness of the sub-textual psychological theater – these are pretty much gone by now, or at least I don't see them as the most progressive, or, for that matter, as the most complicated any more.

"The new complicatedness is the one of the interdisciplinary, non-narrative, and most importantly 'message-less' kind of theater."

Of the one that is not trying to convey any kind of 'truth' to the audiences; it is offering us freedom of interpretation and not only of the production as a whole, but of its every theatrical symbol as well. One can read these productions ambivalently; there is no one right way of interpreting them.

It's different from Leo Dodin's theater, where director is delivering us his interpretation of 'Hamlet': 'tyranny is immanent for Russia, so even when we see new people coming into power, we should know they will turn into tyrants inevitably. This is how it works and we have to accept it'. While audiences can have different attitude to such a message, - one says: 'That's not true!', the other says: 'Great, finally I get it!', - they all receive this same message and understand it similarly. However complicated the theatrical language of such a production is, its goal is still to deliver a message. While the more contemporary theater here is not 'messaging' anything, it offers participation in a cognitive journey, offers the topic but not the answer. And certainly part of the audience is unhappy with it because: 'what did I pay my money for? They didn't deliver me any messages!' But there is also another part - probably 10% of the audience - which perceives such ambivalence as freedom. Such freedom comes with responsibility – one has to take back home his own interpretation of the production.

YURY: Within this structure – where does Serebrennikov belong to, and where does Didenko?

ELENA: Didenko belongs to the contemporary theater, while Serebrennikov - to the theater of the message.

*Russian theater professionals are still arguing a lot about what makes the drama theater piece different from the work of **performance art** (in Marina Abramovich sense of event).*

*The second **Meyerhold festival** this month (sic!) was dedicated to the latter.*

My attention was attracted by the fun experiment "**Protocol We**", the project built by professionals from both contemporary dance and documentary theater with first-time-on-stage *amateurs*. Regular people were not just telling their personal stories divided into various "protocols": 'my home', 'my drama', 'my first love', etc. but also were presenting movement pieces, created based on participant's personal physicality. *Video teaser here.*



Protocol We. Devised by a group, Meyerhold Center, Moscow, 2017

I attended one of the central events of the festival - the Swiss-Japanese contemporary dancer **Kaori Ito** created a piece "**I Dance Because I don't Trust Words**" with her own father **Hiroshi Ito**, in which she was exploring their both personal and artistic relations. Their mutual open-mindedness and sincerity created a piece of unimaginable charm and emotionality; the family and the art - things that so often feel dramatically removed from one another - suddenly came together in this radically humane work. *Video excerpts and pics are here.*



I Dance Because I Don't Trust Words. Choreographed and performed by Kaori Ito and Hiroshi Ito, Meyerhold Center, Moscow, 2017

I also saw the ambitious French-Russian dance project **AkhmatModi**, choreographed by **Mytia Fedotenko**, which brought Anna Akhmatova and Amedeo Modigliani together on stage for a 70-minute long duet. It wasn't as cool as Ito's family piece, yet I was impressed by a number of interestingly invented supports and unusual interactions between the dance and the sculpture. *More pics here. Video here.*



Akhmat Modi. Choreographed by Mytia Fedotenko, Meyerhold Center, Moscow, 2017

Subtext and Hierarchy

YURY: We used to think of Russia as of a literature-centric country, to believe that written word has some extreme importance here. Why then we don't trust our own written laws in everyday life, and why did the idea of subtext appear in Russian theater? Why we distrust the word so much – be it a written or a pronounced one? Why do we keep searching for subtexts?

ELENA: Because we're Byzantine. Byzantine type of thinking implies there's subtext there beyond the text, and that there is sub-action beyond action. This is our cultural characteristic. Our president openly lies to the nation.

YURY: And everybody is fine with that.

ELENA: He lies openly and everybody knows he does. So he does it with no second thought...

YURY: And it's not considered a moral issue.

ELENA: Nobody blames him for that. This is the part of our identity. We accept the fact that he lies.

YURY: So is it enough for us to just say: 'we are Byzantine', and it explains everything?

ELENA: I believe this Byzantine nature of ours manifested itself very clearly in the 20th century. Each and any of us could become a murderer one day and a victim the next day. We are both in one, and we are self-destroyers. This is why we can't condemn Stalin's repressions or apply lustration.

"We are murderers and we're victims – both in one."

YURY: And we are slaves and slave-owners in one.

ELENA: Yes we are.

YURY: So isn't this because... I mean, Russian society feels much more hierarchical to me than the American one. We keep scanning the room and searching for a person of a higher rank, counting stars on shoulders...

ELENA: This is feudalism, this is ineradicable! We had a chance to change it in the last 20 years, and we fucked it up. First (*after the fall of the Soviet Union –YU*) there appeared the hierarchy of money, later we've built new elites - the bureaucratic one most recently.

YURY: Isn't it true in theater as well? You know like when the artistic director walks through the door, everyone present in the building should know he does.

ELENA: It is true because theater became a repository for hierarchical values at the time things were changing all around. We are trying to be different at the Meyerhold's, while our elders are insisting – there can be no democracy in theater. They love this formula.

YURY: It's hard to stop seeing yourself as a slave or others as slaves when there is so much habit...

ELENA: The social institutions were not built; the horizontal interconnections and agreements in the society didn't appear. We still have no civil society. People are expecting and believing only messages coming from the top, it's all vertical.



Konarmia/Red Cavalry (based on Isaak Babel) Created and directed by Maxim Didenko, Meyerhold Center, Moscow, 2017

*My strongest impression from this month with Meyerhold's was the production of "**Konarmia**" (**Red Cavalry**) - the imaginative interdisciplinary piece of physical theater, loosely based on Isaak Babel's book.*

*The author of the production, **Maxim Didenko**, is one of the hottest things in the Russian theater of the past few years. The former dancer of the two legendary companies Derevo and Engineering Theatre AKHE, Maxim directed a spectacular movement piece, clearly meeting Elena Kovalskaya's definition of the post-dramatic 'message-less' theater, providing the audience with more questions than answers on the still very relevant in Russia topic of the attitude to the revolution of 1917 followed by the bloodiest Civil War. [Video teaser here.](#)*



Konarmia/Red Cavalry (based on Isaak Babel) Created and directed by Maxim Didenko, Meyerhold Center, Moscow, 2017

Future

YURY: So what's your forecast about the future of Russian theater? Or better - what would you like to happen?

ELENA: Now I want theater to be complicated, to be less synonymous. And I don't want anybody to send me 'messages' from stage. Because every time they do, I'm like: 'Who are you really to send me messages? Why the fuck are you even doing this? Am I worse than you are or less educated? You understand this life better than I do?'

This is why Polish theater became a revelation for me. Warlikowski in *'(A)pollonia'* instead of giving answers is only placing questions: What is the price of the sacrifice? Who is paying this price?

He's placing these questions on all possible levels: realistic, mythological, and mystical. For him the production is the instrument of thought, and he invites audiences to use his performance as an instrument of thought.

I think in Russia it starts happening mostly in the interdisciplinary theater. In directing it's Bogomolov, Volkostrellov, and Didenko; in playwriting it's Vyrypaev and Priazhko.

"And this is where political and aesthetical meet each other. In a sense, that such kind of theater is forcing audiences to articulate their own attitude to the aesthetical event they are watching."

When Bogomolov is staging Dostoevsky, he doesn't offer us his interpretation, he doesn't have one; he's offering us a number of provocations. We come to the theater to experience something together, but he's not uniting us, he's dividing.

For example he's staging a scene where a man and a woman should make sex; this is what the convention demands from them while they are not feeling comfortable with it. So Bogomolov is staging it the way that they lay on the bed wearing their coats, the guy's got the drill in his hand, she's got a piece of wood, and he's drilling this wood with a horrible noise. I must confess I've never seen anything as physiological as that in theater.

I was watching people in the audience looking at each other, and not knowing how to react. At some point a couple of younger students started laughing, and more people joined them, - they were building a coalition. While the other part of the audience built their own group - they hated what was going on onstage. The politics happened right here, in the audience: people divided and people united without killing each other. They were getting used to accepting different perspectives.

Volkostrellov is doing similar things, but unlike Bogomolov he's working less with the social conventions and more with the audience's aesthetical expectations.

Look here, both the capitalistic and the communistic paradigms failed in the 20-th century. There is no one social paradigm any more that huge amounts people are following, except for probably religion. So now we have to learn how to accept other people's shit that is different from our own. And now when we see somebody insisting his specific set of values is the only right one, we perceive him as a charlatan.

YURY: You are talking tolerance...

ELENA: I'm talking contemporary theater that should be teaching us how to sit next to each other and to tolerate each other, by demonstrating us how different our opinions are.

Both Bogomolov and Volkostrellov do that, while Dodin is telling us instead: 'I know what's right! I got it! Listen to me!', and we're sitting there and are like: 'Oh, please, fuck off... As if you are the only one who does know...'. He still believes he's uniting us by the means of his messages, while it's not true anymore.

Dodin is not helping us to live our lives while Volkostrellov does.

Russian Mysticism

YURY: My last question. What is the mysterious Russian soul? Is Russia still a mystical country? Are you a mystic?

ELENA: I'm interested in mysticism, it attracts me now when every rational idea failed.

YURY: When did every rational idea fail?

ELENA: In 1986 we believed in the ideas of capitalism and democracy, so we started building this new strategy, started building the market. But by 2011 or 12 we realized we didn't manage to build anything. We didn't manage to build civic society or institutions; we failed to subdue authorities to the society. We've fucked up, ate up, smoked up, slept up, and arted up everything. We've missed our chance.

YURY: When did every rational idea fail?

ELENA: In 1986 we believed in the ideas of capitalism and democracy, so we started building this new strategy, started building the market. But by 2011 or 12 we realized we didn't manage to build anything. We didn't manage to build civic society or institutions; we failed to subdue authorities to the society. We've fucked up, ate up, smoked up, slept up, and arted up everything. We've missed our chance.

RECENT EVENTS: GOGOL CENTRE CASE, KIRILL SEREBRENNIKOV, ALEXEY MALOBRODSKY

If you're reading this, you've probably heard at least something about the events around Gogol Centre, from the recent arrest of its Artistic Director Kirill Serebrennikov, to imprisonment of Alexei Malobrodsky, to Kirill's 'postponed' opening of the Nureyev production in Bolshoi Theatre, and about a huge wave of protest among Russian and international artists. If you didn't – there is a number of links below explaining what was going on since May 23rd.

Many people here are enraged, and some are deeply scared – specifically after noticing how Serebrennikov's arrest looked similar the one of Vsevolod Meyerhold in 1939 – one summer night in St. Petersburg...

Moscow City Court denied the appeal today, so Kirill will stay under house arrest till at least October 19th.

The question everybody is asking here – why here and now? The answers vary. I will try to sum up the three most popular theories.

1. People believing there is Big Logic behind everything that's going on in Russian politics trust this to be a part of the Big Strategic Plan, which is **to suppress all sources of free thought and independent behavior by means of 'targeted air-strikes' instead of mass terror**. Within this logic, since approximately 2002, Russian authorities are 'striking' key personalities in *every* professional or social field to scare everyone else in the given field off any sort of unloyalty. They started with high priorities like mass-media and oil-industry, and now made it to the bottom of their importance-list – to theaters, libraries, and other microscopic entities. If this is true, Serebrennikov should be considered a smart choice – both as a leader in the field, a non-conformist, and one burdened by dependency on government funding.
2. Other's theory is of the **'Kremlin Towers' - multiple sources of power** within top Russian leadership. According to their logic, Kirill's patrons in Kremlin became weaker, and the competing pack is coming after them, biting the ones they are patronizing first.
3. We are a **year away from the presidential elections**, and as long as nothing is yet clear about the campaign itself, the future of the government structure after elections, or even about how Putin's general course will change in the next year or two, multiple governmental institutions and individuals are making all kinds of sporadic moves, trying to guess what and who can please 'Papa' the most.

Whatever their logic is, I believe the following:

Kirill is not only a world-class director, but also the one of the very few who actually changed the landscape of post-Soviet theater on every level. While directing aesthetically progressive and daring productions, he found the way to make them popularly attractive - which brought new generations of audiences to theaters, and opened doors of bigger venues for many younger, non-conformist directors and writers. He established connections with, and created platforms for, progressive, non-theatrical professionals (writers, musicians, visual artists) to participate in theatrical initiatives, which contributed enormously to the commonly less progressive theater field. Finally, he created the most unconventional theater in Russia (The Gogol Centre) out of the most rotting Soviet institution, which 'physically' proved to us all – change is possible. Against this backdrop, my belief that he's a genius as a director can just stay my belief.

Russia's legal and financial system is built the way that every time one sneezes, s/he breaks some kind of a regulation -- and I believe it was built that way on purpose. The fact that even in these given circumstances, the accuser had to invent clearly false charges, makes me absolutely sure -- Seventh Studio and Gogol Centre people didn't steal a penny of the State money.

It's not exactly the first attack on art that does not fit the bigger political paradigm Russian authorities on multiple levels adhere to. Yet it's certainly the most aggressive, persevering, and absurdist. What's happening today with Malobrodsky, Masliaeva, Itin, and Serebrennikov is a form of torture, is based on no legal grounds, and demands an articulate response from all of us both inside Russia and abroad.

On Serebrennikov's arrest and protest

The Moscow Times, John Freedman, August 25th

The Guardian, August 23rd

The New York Times, August 22nd

The European Film Academy protest letter

International Artist's protest letter

On the Gogol Centre case

Crimerussia.com on the latest developments in Malobrodsky case, July 19th

The Calvert Journal on how theater economics works in Russia, July 5th

John Freedman's article in Moscow Times on the Gogol Centre case, June 30th

Radio Free Europe on Malobrodsky case, June 22nd

Meduza.io report on Serebrennikov apartment search, May 23rd

On Nureyev at Bolshoi

Meduza.io on the Bolshoi Theater ban of Serebrennikov's production of Nureyev ballet. Video excerpts and critic's opinion, July 13

Meduza.io publishes Kirill's post and pictures from after the run-through of Nureyev ballet, July 12



RUSSIAN NOTEBOOK

NUMBER 1, Sept 2017

WRITER:

Yury Urnov

PUBLISHER:

**Center for International Theatre
Development**

Philip Arnoult, founder & director

OUR THANKS TO:



Copyright © 2017 CITD, All rights reserved.