



RUSSIAN NOTEBOOK '17-'18

from Yury Urnov

#3 12/17

7 December 2017

Dear Friends,



Yury has been in Novosibirsk for over a month now, directing Guillermo Calderon's *Kiss* at the fabled Red Torch Theatre. I've never been that far East—it's nearly 1800 miles southeast of Moscow, deep in the heart of Siberia. But Novosibirsk also has a unique cultural and intellectual history—and now, with the Red Torch and its 33-year-old director Timofey Kulyabin, making a great deal of noise in both Russia and Europe. I'm intrigued.

Yury and Timofey engage in a lively conversation around the director as auteur, "the jaded texts" of classics, the new Russian Drama, his audiences, the world of "broken logic", Stanislavsky, and the scandals surrounding his productions of his *Tannhauser* and *The Trail*.



Yury also spent time in Kulyabin's theatre seeing work, and offers us a savvy director's take on the aforementioned *The Trial*, Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, Lermontov's *The Masquerade*, and Pushkin's *Onegin*. Be sure to check out the videos.

Yury's *Kiss* will open in late January. In an email to me two days ago, he talked about

his actors, the rehearsal process and his continuing work with designer, Misha Kachman (Misha designed the Woolly Mammoth production for Yury in DC a year ago, and was just in Novosibirsk with Yury):

Yuri writes:

It was hard for me to even chose actors – the company (of 40) is just too good. We did a week of etudes with a dozen, in groups they prepared their versions of Part 1 of the play. By the end of this week I finally had to make a choice, which was a drama, I must admit, because I had to leave some great actors behind. The three women in the show are the same who are doing three sisters in Timofey's Chekhov piece – they are hard to beat.

We rehearse 6 days a week. Normally only between 11 am and 4 pm, because a lot of them have to do evening repertoire shows at 6; the days they don't, we also have rehearsals in the evenings.

Because the show is so much about context, and about how it changes our perspective of what's true and what's false, the production in Russia will be quite different from the one in DC – the contexts here are so different, and probably truths are as well. Is this what they mean describing our epoch as post-truth? Probably. At least this is what production will be about: the world where we are trying so hard to find what's true and never succeed, however earnest our attempts are.

We are now somewhat through first three parts of the show, so I really don't yet know where we will land with the 4th. Which is probably alright – we are still 7 weeks away from opening it (with 6 weeks behind) on January 30th.

Yuri will be heading back to Moscow and the Taganka Theatre in February to begin rehearsals of Maxim Kurochkin's *The Schooling of Bento Bonchev*. I'm so pleased those two will be working together again soon.



Three days ago, [I received the latest news](#) on the Gogol/Serebrennikov/Malobrodsky show trial from our long-time partner, John Freedman. This post is a chilling update on the machinations of this government attack on the theatre and its leadership.

Yury opens this issue of *Russian Notebook* with a quote from the vice-speaker of the Novosibirsk Parliament, 9 days ago, referring to Timofey:

“I would not let Kulyabin anywhere outside Kolyma Region*”

* Under [Joseph Stalin](#)'s rule, Kolyma became the most notorious region for the [Gulag labor camps](#)

Things continue to deteriorate. Dark dark times indeed.

But, I hope each of you will create islands of light in this holiday season.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Philip Arnault', with a stylized, cursive script.

Philip Arnault
founder & director



RUSSIAN NOTEBOOK '17-'18

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ABOUT THE NOVOSIBIRSK 'RED TORCH' THEATRE & TIMOFEY KULYABIN

*“I would not let Kulyabin anywhere
outside Kolyma Region*”*

-Andrey Parfyonov, vice-speaker of the Novosibirsk
Parliament, November 30, 2017

* Under [Joseph Stalin's](#) rule, Kolyma became the most notorious region
for the [Gulag labor camps](#).

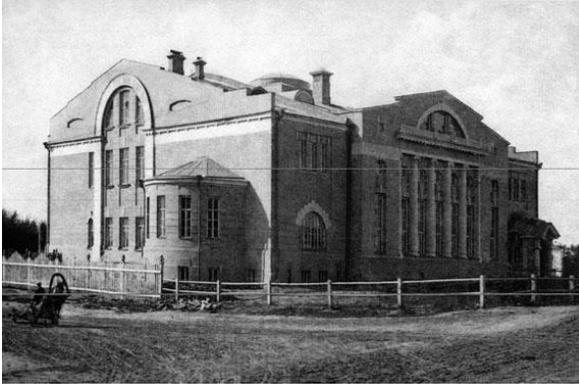


Dear Friends,

I'm in the middle of my journey into Siberia. I spend most of my days rehearsing Guillermo Calderon's *KISS* and watching shows in the evenings. I did my last production with the Red Torch Theater 12 years ago, and now I'm extremely glad to be back to this powerful city and amazing theater.

Novosibirsk with the population of 1,600,000 is third largest in Russia, the capital of Siberia, and home for something they call Academic's Town – the 130,000 population research center, grand Soviet project, which in 1957 brought together best young scientists and their families from all over the Soviet Union to live and work here. This certainly helped a lot with the artistic development of the bigger city – walking through the central part of it, one sees pretty much nothing but cultural buildings, including the biggest in Russia Opera and Ballet theater, Red Torch, two Philharmonic Halls, Libraries, Dance and Music Conservatories, etc.

Out of 17 theaters in the city, probably 4 or 5 are recognized nationally, but Red Torch is still the special one among them. In Russia, they call it 'Siberian MHAT' (Siberian Moscow Art Theatre) for the historically strong acting company and long history. The touring-theater landed in Novosibirsk in 1932, while the building was erected even earlier, in 1914.

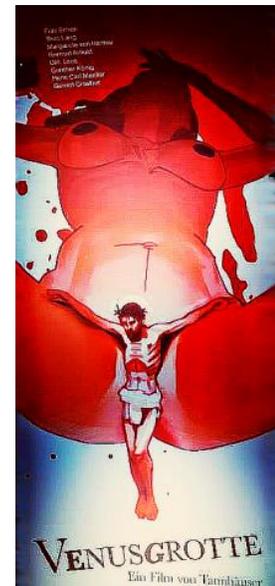


In 1999 Alexander Kulyabin became the Managing Director of the theater; in 2007 his son Timofey graduated from GITIS, and directed his first show here; and 8 years later the latter Kulyabin was appointed the Chief Director of the Red Torch. I will be doing a separate issue on both of them, but my first one is dedicated to ***Timofey Kulyabin***.

Timofey who is only 33 now, became a nationally recognizable theater figure by 2010 when he was nominated for best directing of two shows in the same season (in drama and in opera) by the All-Russian Golden Mask festival, and in 2014 marked a place for himself in the history books by directing the production after Richard Wagner’s *TANNHAUSER* at the Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet theater.

What happened to that piece in 2015, now can be seen as the first robin of the Russian Government’s attack on theater in the country. The “deliberate public desecration of religious symbols” case against Timofey and theater’s Managing Director Boris Mezdrich was initiated by the Russian Orthodox Church, and they both had to prove their innocence in court. The case became famous, federal mass media was all over it. Later it was dismissed, yet Mezdrich was fired, *TANNHAUSER* never returned into the repertoire, and Timofey was reckoned as one of the central figures of the “fifth column” by the new ultra-patriots.

The only reason for all this fuss was the fact that Kulyabin made the title character a director shooting his film about Jesus Christ at Venus Grotto with the poster to the right; later in the production the director was beaten up and banished by his colleagues and former friends for doing this.



Since then Kulyabin directed a number of productions at the Red Torch, at the Bolshoi and at the Nationalities Theater in Moscow, and also in Germany. Again and again his productions were

nominated for the Golden Mask, and both his *Onegin* and the *Three Sisters* won this main Russian theater award.

Before I came and saw his shows, I was internally attributing part of his fame to the public scandal around *Tannhauser*, but what I saw on the stages of the Red Torch during the last month changed my attitude completely. I believe in Timofey's case we're dealing with a directorial phenomenon of rare scale and occurrence, and I'm happily sharing here both my interview with him, and my impressions about the 5 shows of his I've seen, accompanied by some pictures and videos.

INTERVIEW WITH TIMOFEY KULYABIN

The Trial and the Repressions

YURY: "Curious" is not the perfect word, but I can't not ask... None of us reading this probably had the experience of going through the Russian court procedure you had: so, how did it affect you, how did it affect your work?

TIMOFEY: By and large it didn't. Obviously, it was a stress; and I don't believe all experiences are useful – this one wasn't useful for me. But it didn't affect me creatively, it didn't change me. I have my own censor inside which is my artistic taste, and the "Tannhauser" experience didn't change how this censor works. I direct what I want to direct, and I do it exactly the way I want to do it. And it really wasn't about my show anyway. These people, they didn't even see the show. Which sounds like pure absurdity to me. It wasn't about my work, and it wasn't about Wagner. They found some silly excuse, they took it out of context, and they presented it to the court in the absurdist perspective.

YURY: So your production of Kafka's "Trial" (Process) wasn't at all about the trial? It was your first show after they took you to court!

TIMOFEY: I know how it looks from the side... But it wasn't like that. I wanted to do it for 3 or 4 years before I did "Tannhauser", I just love this book.

YURY: Gotcha. Just one more political question. We all see this wave of government attacks on theaters – what's going on? It only started few months ago and it's massive – where this shit is coming from, you think?

TIMOFEY: It is very hard for me to imagine. I don't really think about it, and I don't have any sources. I can only dare to assume that the reasons are terribly banal and human.

YURY: Like, you mean – personal?

TIMOFEY: Yes. I don't believe the State we have is even able to organize some kind of serious and planned policy to destroy intelligentsia, to destroy the cultural class. Complicated plans require some actual intelligence which is just not there. So it's probably just some two guys sitting there...

YURY: Holding a grudge...

TIMOFEY: Yes, they probably just chew revenge... something personal... And there are so many people inside the theatre field who are happy to support this shit... nobody needs them otherwise, they don't see any other way to fulfil themselves, and now they feel it's their time to bury talented

people, so they bloom and they stink. There is plenty of them, and sure they are talking “morality” and “spirituality” ...

YURY: I like this explanation better for a number of reasons.

The Trial (by Franz Kafka)



Good things about the Red Torch's Trial begin with the adaptation of the novel done by Olga Fedyanina for this special occasion. It is very respectful to Kafka and also meticulous – pretty much every scene of the novel is included in the script.

Kulyabin with his creative team invents scenic device that explains the concept, the style, and the attitude of the production: all characters but Joseph K. are faceless and somewhat voiceless – they all are wearing masks (creating a feeling of real face with missing traits), and their voices are completely distorted by mikes with strong effect on top. The effect is same for all, but different voices sound differently with it. I'm glad to say that even under masks it's easy to distinguish the better actor from the worse one.



Needless to explain – Joseph wakes up in the world deprived of personality. Anton Voinalovich in this part with his young age, ingenuous face, and seemingly frail body is the only real human on stage, also filled with dated technology pieces – video-tapes and players, non-flat monitors, and heavy video-cameras on tripods – which create the dual feeling of nostalgia and recognizability of the government office.

The voice of the author is also present, and it's not the impersonation of Franz Kafka reading from his own book downstage left. I'm not sure if they still do it a lot on the American TV, but here in Russia they often show a "secret agent" sitting in hood with the light source behind the head. This is exactly what Timofey does with the narrator's character, and by this, creates the figure of indisputable authority and power; audience has no choice but to trust this guy. (I meant to write this ironically, but I ended up recalling that while sitting there I wasn't challenging his words either).



Like in all Kulyabin's shows I've seen - it's not about radical interpretation, it's about making famous text relevant, characters and conflicts - recognizable. It's about taking the old book from the shelf and making it the real fact of today's life. If only every director could do that.

But what struck me the most with this particular piece was the audience. Let me put it straight - the production is not an easy walk in the park: it's depressing, it's dark, it's hopeless, it's consciously monotonous; the sound-track is pressures on the edge of unbearable; and we all know it won't end well from the first scene. Yet 550 people sit there, listen, and think (I could almost physically feel how they did); very few left in the intermission. I'm just saying.

Here's The Trial on Russian news. There's some interesting [VIDEO](#) there between people speaking.



TIMOFEY: I don't think it's the system, or the conspiracy plot, or the historical paradigm... it's just these several guys there... They are mediocre, but they have resources and possibilities to harm. And just because it's a pleasure to do harm – they do it.

YURY: Maybe.

TIMOFEY: They love it. To break into somebody's backyard and to shit on their flowerbed? Nothing beats this!

YURY: I'm trying to imagine...

TIMOFEY: And, by the way, it's the favorite sport of the Russian intelligentsia...

Director as Auteur

YURY: Director is an Auteur of the production in Russia – can we accept this statement as a basic premise?

TIMOFEY: Well, yes, certainly. Unconditionally. Yet I believe there is a difference between interpretational directing and pure authorship. In the former case, the director can change perspective, time, or placement, invent new rules to unpack the play, but the production is mostly based on playwrights' text. The latter, I think, is when the play is just a starting point, when the text doesn't really matter much...

YURY: Is there a clear border line?

TIMOFEY: Probably not, specifically if we include deconstruction or the completely new analysis of the well-known text....

YURY: On which side of this borderline are you?

TIMOFEY: I think I'm closer to interpreters. I'm working with the playwright's system of axes. I'm studying his paradigm, I'm aware of his propositions about style, time, space, composition, and conflict. Even though I may choose to agree or disagree with these propositions, I'm aware of them. I'm in permanent dialogue with the author.

YURY: Who is on the Auteur's side of directing in Russia now?

TIMOFEY: Konstantin Bogomolov (*I will be writing about his productions in the Moscow Art Theater issue –YU*), first of all. For him the text is just the departure point, the teaser... From there on he builds his own text.

YURY: Didenko? (*See issue #1 about Meyerhold Centre –YU*)

TIMOFEY: I didn't see much of his work, but from what I've seen – he's moving in this direction.

YURY: Are you moving in this direction too?

TIMOFEY: On the contrary, I think. I'm working with the extremely well-known “jaded” texts, everything there is already re-re-interpreted many times. I'm just trying to find scenic language to let these dead texts live again. *Three Sisters* is the clearest example of such revitalization.

The Three Sisters (by Anton Chekhov)



All right. No doubt this production is the landmark of the Russian (and probably of the European) Chekhovian theater history. There already are many formal reasons to think so: Golden Mask prize; month-long tour of France, including 10 nights at Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe; huge success at the Austrian Wiener Festwochen – and I'm sure there will be more proofs.

Timofey goes beyond directing a very good psychological and, aesthetically speaking, relatively traditional production. He invents the way to make Chekhov's text be heard.



Some years ago I saw a production of The Cherry Orchard at one famous Russian theater, and when Anna instead of saying "Cherry Orchard was sold" mistakenly declared that "Kindergarten was", nobody in the audience even blinked - these people weren't listening, and they weren't listening for many reasons: bad production of Chekhov is extremely boring; actors in his plays just "say things" while meaning something different; we are too cynical to perceive multiple characters heartaches with sympathy... I could add 15 more reasons to this list, but in the end of the day it's all the same – we used these texts too many times in the past 100 years, we devastated them and made them meaningless.



There is no good or smart, or earnest way of saying these lines anymore. So Kolyabin's actors don't. The production is performed in Russian sign language with subtitles. For 4 and-a-half hours (including 3 intermissions) actors stay mute, yet Chekhov's text sounds loud and clear in the heads of the audience. It feels like a miracle, but I believe there is a technology behind it: actors don't play subtext which makes characters very open and naive; their main goal is to be understood, and their diligence is extremely touching; finally – audience perceives not-pronounced lines personally, each hearing them in the unique and individual way, each on a date with Chekhov of his/her own.



And then there's the stunning ensemble. It's not just that the Sisters (Linda Akhmetzyanova – Irina; Darya Emelyanova – Masha; Irina Krivonos – Olga) are great, pretty much every character is a revelation: Solhony (Konstantin Telegin) is a tough (Sovietish?) military officer, unable to string a sentence together (if there is a pun here – it's unintended), loving Irina passionately, sexually and darkly, and when drunk even slapping her face violently, after being rejected again. Chebutykin (Andrey Chernykh) is as touching, funny, human and yet pathetic as one could only dream – not so old at all, possibly Irina's father (in his dreams only), full of understanding and wisdom he will never be able to share, because nobody takes him seriously.

I hope you can see this show. Here's some pretty good [VIDEO](#)



YURY: Of the text we know so well, we don't even hear it anymore...

TIMOFEY: We don't hear it; there is no way of saying it anymore... I'm trying to find the new approach, to invent the new game, the new way of transmitting this text... I'm kind of a resuscitator; I take this corpse, and I try make it live again. So, interpretation probably isn't the right word...

New and Old Drama

YURY: Did you ever direct a contemporary play?

TIMOFEY: No, not the play. Once I did a production based on real texts from "LiveJournal", but this was long time ago in Riga, and it wasn't quite a documentary...

YURY: This is true for most theaters in Russia – we still have 90% of repertoire built on classical texts, and only a handful of new plays produced. Why is this so? What's wrong with the new drama?

TIMOFEY: When I'm doing classics, I'm not just staging the text, I'm in dialogue with the long tradition of its interpretation. I can argue with the tradition, or I can get mad or stay respectful to it... And if I'm doing Shakespeare, it's not just about the historic background of the play, it's about the life and the myth of the text in history, in film, in culture... The richer the iconography surrounding the text, the more interested I am. I can work with different cultural codes. It becomes a 3-dimensional challenge for me.

When it's a new play, I can only argue with the words written in it. There is no way to exploit the stereotypes of perception, for example, because there is no stereotype.

Maybe this will change, maybe I just need to find "my author". For example, I know Pavel Priazhko (*see issue 1 about the Meyerhold Center New Drama Festival –YU*), he's really an important playwright. But Dmitry Volkostrellov (*the important director of the younger generation –YU*) already does a lot of his plays, and does them very well; he knows them well, he feels them well; I won't even try to compete with Dmitry, because he knows better how these texts are built. And then there is Vyrypaev, but I'm completely indifferent about his texts...

YURY: Including *DRUNKS*?

TIMOFEY: Including *DRUNKS*. Just doesn't resonate with me. And – I'll be happy to be proven wrong – but I don't feel like there is a big important wave of new plays, which demand immediate staging. Like there was one in Britain with Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill. Then there was a feeling the new language was born. Or when Martin McDonagh suddenly became the most important Russian playwright...

YURY: Oh, yes, he did...

TIMOFEY: Like for five years in a row every theater produced his plays. Extremely complicated Irish playwright suddenly conquers Russia. Suddenly his plays made so much sense here – not in France or Germany where I've never seen a poster with his name on it... It's always sudden, but it's also always immediately clear – I have to stage this piece, we need it here and now... There needs to be a natural immediate need to stage a contemporary play...

Great Mystery of Theater in Russia

YURY: Same question I ask everybody in my interviews: Theater seems to be very important for Russia at the moment - what kind of role is it playing in the society? Why do people go see theater?

Beyond ritual, family, or dating matters on one end, and beyond socially and politically proactive theater - on the other. The former works the same in every country, and we just don't have that much of the latter one.

TIMOFEY: You know... we Russians live in the world of broken logic. When we are in grief – we sing. We find escape through creativity, and we're very inventive in it. We solve our problems not through analyzing them, but mostly intuitively. For example, by throwing out some energy...

YURY: Like stars do...

TIMOFEY: In our mentality a lot is built around the idea of the Great Mystery, which none of us will ever be able to understand. This is a tragic feeling, because at the same time we all are a part of it.

YURY: And we suspect theater will help us get closer to understanding this Mysterium Cosmographicum?

TIMOFEY: Right. We think artists are Holy Fools with an even more troubled consciousness, who are closer to this Mystery than everyone else.

YURY: Kind of a smuggler who can take us there...

TIMOFEY: Yes, this Holy Fool may know nothing, but he is like an antenna receiving signals and translating them to us, the way Lear's Fool did. Historically this function belongs to theater in Russia.

YURY: So a trip to the theater is like a verity run? Verity we can't find or understand on our own?

TIMOFEY: Correct. To understand something beyond rational, social, normal; to get onto the next level. Probably this is what people are expecting when they come to see the show.

YURY: Quite an adequate expectation... Irrational is so important for us – it's everywhere: in family relations, in child upbringing, in buying a carton of milk.

TIMOFEY: And theater is catering this outreach to the irrational.

YURY: So what are you experiencing as a well-known artist? What's people's attitude to you?

TIMOFEY: Well, if you don't mean bureaucrats...

YURY: I don't...

TIMOFEY: I think they are approving my existence; they understand my function. I may be strange or different, but I'm a fine fellow in general. They feel artists as a class are important.

YURY: So no petting on the shoulder and: "Oh, you're doing theater? Worse things happen at sea."

Hedda Gabler (by Henrik Ibsen)



Who the hell is this woman and why is it she hates everybody so much? – I believe is the question each of us once asked about Hedda. Kulyabin juxtaposes Hedda’s drunk and aggressive sincerity to the smiling hypocrisy of the bourgeois world surrounding her. Eilert Lovborg’s character (Pavel Polyakov) in his sober quality is a pathetic and almost “Rain Man”- psychotic joke, whom everybody is making fun of; he’s trying to become a part of the “normal” world and almost succeeds, but the price is too high – his individuality. To save him from this poor fate, Hedda makes him drink again, and even sends him to death.

Beyond this yet again clear story, Timofey builds Hedda’s character recognizable to every teenager in this country – she’s listening to Eminem, tattoos cover half of her body; she hates pants, and prefers to walk around half-naked. The apartment she shares with her doing-morning-runs husband and grotesquely sexy and evil Maid is the dream of every new bourgeois – it even has private elevator with the private liftboy (I don’t know how much this set cost, but I promise I will ask). And yet it’s clear from the very first scene – she’s trapped, she already lost the game; little by little this world will consume her revolutionism and will break her back. And she knows it.



Hedda is probably the riskiest dream for an actress. Darya Emelyanova mightily fulfills hers in this production – she is fearless, every bone and cell of hers boils with conflict; the world around both enrages and surprises her – “you must be kidding me?!”; her unskillful empathy to Eilert’s pain is too sudden and earnest to not appreciate.



The production is balanced between expressive realism and grotesque. There is a moment in the final act when grotesque is going over the board, and for a second I felt perplexed (new genre rules?), yet next second I saw Hedda's eyes open wide in horror, and understood this was the shift in her perception of the scene. There were a couple other moments when such shifts felt less motivated, but this somehow made me even more grateful to the director for not just settling with straight realism – this play really demands to go beyond it.



TIMOFEY: No, I don't think so. Theater is more important in Russia than that. Look at all this political activity around theater – they are dealing with us as if we're serious opposition.

YURY: This is exactly what's striking! What? Why the fuck do they even care? Gogol Center? What...

TIMOFEY: Closing, prohibiting productions, suing artists, as if they have no other serious stuff to deal with...

YURY: And the same seriousness within the theatrical community – worlds collapse and new galaxies are born on a daily basis. Where is this power (and this ambition) coming from?

TIMOFEY: What strikes me is it's happening in the same world Elon Musk is sending people to Mars in 2024... While we're seriously fighting over the borders of interpretation in theater...

(laughter)

YURY: It's just we're responsible for this particular part of the galaxy, it's fine.

Spectators

YURY: We've been watching *Onegin*, and there was this guy who stood up, said "bullshit" - quite loudly, and left. Do you think many others were feeling the same but stayed out of politeness or fear? Or everyone else is so well prepared and educated to read complicated visual metaphors, to understand theater language? I don't mean at the Red Torch only.

TIMOFEY: It really depends on the city. Moscow, St. Pete, Novosibirsk or Yekaterinburg is one thing, but it's different beyond these few. And even in Moscow – you go to Gogol Center, Lenkom, or Doronina's MHAT, and you see three different kinds of people, there is nothing in common between these three groups, they are from different planets.

YURY: What about the Red Torch spectators?

TIMOFEY: They got used to the fact that theater language doesn't have to be primitive, now they feel fine about it. But it was different 5 years ago, when we'd just opened *Onegin*. A lot of people were pissed: what does this guy in panties have to do with *Onegin*?

YURY: A lot I think.

TIMOFEY: But this was the first reaction. At the first show they were screaming "it's pornography", they were walking out, they were writing letters to authorities. But a year later everything was already fine. We have to educate, to nurture – it's a complicated process, but it's the only way.

YURY: I mean 5 years is pretty fast, I must say!

How do you imagine your spectator – the one you're directing for?

TIMOFEY: You know there was only one production, where I was aggressive to the spectators – it's *Hedda Gabler*. But this was probably it. I believe I'm thinking of a person who saw a lot, whose expectations are not banal. So I want to suggest to him something I was thinking about – he may or may not like it, it's fine as long as there is dialogue, right?

Stanislavsky

YURY: For most people in the world, Russian theater is still about three basic things: Stanislavsky, psychological theater, and realism – kind of a package deal. Do you feel connected to this tradition?

TIMOFEY: It's funny – I've never considered myself the adherent of the System, on the contrary... Yet, my most important work – the *Three Sisters* is very much based on Stanislavsky's experience. See this book? "Stanislavsky's Mis-en-scenes"? I was literally working off it in rehearsals.

I now think that as long as there is an actor on stage – the most interesting way to interact with the part and with the plot is to psychologically justify the character's actions, when you find motivations, analyze causation and incidence, and define action. Which is crazy complicated if we're not talking imitation – very few can do it. Yet the best acting works are built that way.

And it's not in Russia only. I see Ivo van Hove doing this, and I see Thomas Ostermeier doing this. I see them talking about people, about relations, about behavior, about motivations, and about everything... This is the only way. The rest is the set of devices – at this moment the actor is formal, at that moment – estranged or sending messages into outer space... But psychological analysis makes theatrical text thicker, and more interesting to watch. For me it's the rocket science; it's not the only possible way, but it is the most complicated one.

Really, what is the main point of the Stanislavsky Method? It's an attempt to make the actor behave naturally in unnatural circumstances.

YURY: Do you teach now?

TIMOFEY: I don't. I did for a year, and both Linda Akhmetzianova and Sergei Bogovolov are from this group. But then I thought – I should either teach or direct, I can't do both. Yet there is sure a lot of pedagogy in rehearsals.

Chief Director

YURY: You've been the Artistic Director of the Red Torch since 2015...

TIMOFEY: No, I haven't, I'm the Chief Director, it's a different thing.

YURY: My bad. What's the difference?

TIMOFEY: The position of Artistic Director now exists only in the few bigger Moscow and St. Petersburg theaters; it's for popular media personalities like Tabakov or Dodin. They are in complete charge of their theaters, they hire everyone, including Managing Directors. In the peripheral theaters, on the contrary, most of the power belongs to Managing Directors, who hire Chief Directors. So my function is not so broad: I direct a production once every year or every two years; I find and recommend new actors for the company; I can only advise the Managing Director on hiring other directors, while the final decision is his. Plus, I do some regular everyday work, like when we need to replace an actor – I rehearse with him. But it's nothing like Chief Dramaturg or Intendant in Germany...

The Masquerade (by Mikhail Lermontov)



While being one of the cornerstones of Russian literature, this play is not widely known beyond our stages, partially because it's written in verse, partially because the plot sounds too romantic: the elder guy marries the younger woman; in the casino he saves the life of a younger player by winning his money back; at the masquerade the younger player meets and makes love to the disguised woman; to escape recognition the woman he made love to, gives him the bracelet she found on the floor; the bracelet happens to belong to the young wife of the old fellow; everybody is sure the young wife made love to the young gambler; the old husband poisons his wife, and wins all the money of the young gambler; the old enemy of the old fellow shows up and tells him the truth – he has just killed two innocent people; kaboom.

And here is another great quality of Timofey's pieces: the plot is always super-clear as well as the character's motivations so it is just entertaining to watch them – even before all the artsy stuff begins. Every time I saw this play before, it was anything but interesting. Beautiful, poetic, philosophical – yes; interesting – never. The set is quite stunning, the mise-en-scenes are very elaborate, yet mostly just supportive of the central goal – making this old “corpse” of the play fly again.

The earliest of Kulyabin's shows in Red Torch is not so deep and perfect as Three Sisters, yet, you know what? It's been running for seven years now and will probably do a decade – not too shabby I think.

[VIDEO](#) is here.



YURY: So you don't have to deal with money at all? Fundraising or budget?

TIMOFEY: I don't. The Managing Director is solely responsible for budgeting, for negotiating fees, and all the money work.

Repertoire

YURY: What about your repertoire/programming policy? So far I've seen five shows you directed, and three more, which were also very good, directed by Yegorov, by Bargman, and by Grigoryan. But I'm aware there is also the commercial segment of the repertoire...

TIMOFEY: We can't build repertoire based solely on the artistic policy; we don't have enough money for that. We can't afford, say, dedicating a full season to the new drama only. Though our theater is quite famous in both Russia and abroad, the government funding we receive is really small (*Theater is funded by the Novosibirsk region; I will try to get as many real numbers as possible in my next interview with the Managing Director of the Red Torch – YU*). Even in comparison to other Regional Theaters it is, say nothing of the big federal theaters of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

So we have to struggle to survive. We have the commercial segment in our repertoire, it's probably 5 out of 15 productions running, but it's enough to say we don't have the cohesive repertoire policy. One in three nights we do a commercial show, and I don't want to pretend these productions don't exist. We have to find a balance between artistic and commercial.

Another reason is - our city doesn't have that many theaters, and we need to provide different segments of spectators with the kinds of theater they are interested in. For example, we have to have a show for kids and families. It's not like we're in Moscow, where different audiences go to different theaters; here they all come to Red Torch, and we need to have something for each of them – we owe this to the city.

YURY: So when you say “commercial” what exactly do you mean?

TIMOFEY: Done for the broader audiences, based on simple literature, directed in the relatively primitive theater language...

YURY: With the clear narrative...

TIMOFEY: With clear narrative, accessible, entertaining...

YURY: There is nothing wrong with this kind of theater...

TIMOFEY: Absolutely, it can be brilliant when done well. But the goal here is to serve the audience's demand, which goes in some contradiction with what we understand theater is since 20th century, where the goal is to reveal the problem and to find an artistic interpretation of it, to comprehend it by artistic means.

I will repeat myself: it's not enough to just reveal the problem, there is Facebook for that, and there is Mass Media. Our strength is in artistic interpretation of the information by means of artistic images. Then the problem is not two-dimensional any more, it becomes complex, polysemantic; the bigger the work of art is, the more meanings one can read in it. I mean, look at Dostoevsky...

YURY: So how does this combine with the quite Soviet Stanislavsky's idea of the super-objective – kind of a thesis that the director has to prove through the production? When the director is presenting and imposing his personal attitude...

TIMOFEY: Yes, it's easy to get lost here. I don't believe as a director I have a right to explain or to deliver my truth to everybody. I'm not a missionary, and I'm happy I'm not...

YURY: Not a preacher...

TIMOFEY: Neither a teacher... I'm a Fool, I'm a jokester. I have a choice to be or to not be serious.

And it's all about personality – you have to be thinking unconventionally and experiencing reality idiosyncratically to be an artist... Then I'm ready to spend hours studying your work, learning your personal experiences.

Entry Points

TIMOFEY: *Onegin* was very personal for me. I was in the early mid-age crisis then, I was deeply depressed, so this production was my battle with my own depression.

YURY: Lack of motivation for existence?

TIMOFEY: Yep. Distemper. I lived through it, and I gave birth to this production. So basically you're just watching me picking my ears. Yet I believe as long as it's sincere and as long as there is personality behind it – it will be interesting for the others to watch. I deeply believe the strong personality will at some point find the unique style, and the new theatrical language will be born...

Onegin (by Alexander Pushkin)



This production seems to be the logical forerunner of the Three Sisters: actors rarely speak in it; it's close to 'naïve art'; it's maturely empathetic to human nature.

We hear most of Pushkin's novel in verse as a recorded narration, and even so, there are long completely silent areas in the show. The device works great – it lets actors fully concentrate on internal monologues staying in a kind of cinematic yet expressive acting mode; the audience quickly learns how to read scenic narrative with no words involved, and becomes very attentive to physical and psychological details.



ONEGIN is not just the cornerstone, it's the "Main Text" of Russian poetry – there was this annoying woman sitting behind me in the audience, who kept whispering lines from the novel three seconds before I heard them from speakers. *Kulyabin* modernizes the characters' habitat (primarily Onegin's), yet the world he builds doesn't feel realistic at all – young poet Lensky (Sergey Bogomolov) writes his poems with a huge piece of chalk on every wall of the set, and inspiredly jumps over the chairs while the antique phonograph is playing Madonna's *Jump*. Olga (Valeriya Kruchinina) enters, accompanied by the group of fellow actors, blowing wind with electric fans in her face and hair, lighting her up with portable stage-lights, while Lensky is outlining a silhouette of her shadow on the wall with his magic chalk. Tatyana begins her letter to Onegin on the piece of paper, and ends up writing it all over the wooden tabletop, and landing into the overturned table as into the bath or the coffin (probably both).



The one guy who pretty much stays within the scenic paradigm of realism is Onegin (Pavel Polyakov). He doesn't do poetry, and he doesn't do love, but he does death by killing the Poet in a duel – kind of unwillingly, and – yes – provoked by Zaretsky (Georgy Bolonev), but he does. Which I think explains the central conflict of the novel, and Onegin himself very clearly.

Timofey changes the ending – instead of repenting, we see hard-boiled Eugene recording video-blog on his computer, telling us the story of the novel's events from his perspective and in simple everyday language. And yet through this calmness one can notice the well-disguised tone of real drama – really, what's scarier than the inability to feel anything humane?

And here's some [VIDEO](#)



YURY: What was your entry point into *Three Sisters*?

TIMOFEY: Oh, this was just a challenge. I wanted to make a show in sign-language. It just turned out to be much more interesting than I could imagine.

There is this moment in the production, when they put a whirligig on the table, and all these deaf people lean and put their ears to the tabletop listening. Critics wrote this was the image of contemporary Russian intelligentsia: people who can't hear shit, can't hear their own people, and this is why life is tough on them. I certainly didn't direct anything like this. It's just because this is the great text, it starts telling itself at some point.

YURY: Well, after the director has applied a particular device to it...

TIMOFEY: Robert Lepage said – if the production is done well, it will explain itself.

YURY: And critics will find a formula.

How about the Trial? The device also came first? I mean masked faces and voices?

TIMOFEY: No. This device was born in rehearsals. We started with the text, which is completely unfit for the stage. So after we did all this enormous work on it, fitting every scene of the novel into the script, I understood there is nothing to act in it within the paradigm of psychological theater; we are seeing events but nothing is motivated, it's all purely absurd.

And then we were rehearsing with mikes, Irina Krivonos was on stage, and I asked sound-designer to distort her voice. And I immediately saw the difference, the text started working, and everything suddenly became clear to me. From there on the logic is simple: this whole production is the video-tape we're watching, it's the investigative documentary in which all faces are disguised, and voices altered.

YURY: There's still a difference when Krivonos, or Telegin, or Chernikh are on the stage...

TIMOFEY: Well, you are just naming three leading actors...

YURY: Strong personalities break through.

TIMOFEY: They do. Even through masks and mikes.

YURY: Well, listen, you've built an amazing theater! Thank you so much for doing this!

TIMOFEY: Thank you.

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