

After the Anger



Contemporary Russian theatre reflects a divisive political moment with rage, irony and low-fuss experimentation

BY ROB WEINERT-KENDT

Timofei Tribuntsev and Artem Osipov in director Yury Butusov's angry interpretation of Chekhov's *The Seagull*.

EKATERINA ISVETKOVA

WE'RE ONLY 45 MINUTES INTO AN ALMOST-FIVE-hour-long rendition of *The Seagull*, and the director himself has stormed the stage. To destroy a canvas flat with his bare hands. To the snarl and rumble of electric guitars.

It's self-evidently an orchestrated moment, as are the many interventions and meta-theatrical gambits that pepper Yury Butusov's fierce, expansive, often hauntingly ruminative production of Chekhov's masterpiece about an extended family of self-dramatizing narcissists and lopsided, inchoate couplings. But the punkish, strangely exuberant anger behind Butusov's repeated appearances on stage—and indeed behind every element of this strenuous and sensuous production at Moscow's Satirikon Theatre—feels authentic, deep-rooted, barely in control, as if a lid had been lifted over a raging furnace.

I later ask John Freedman—the American journalist who's made Moscow his home since 1988, and the Russian theatre his beat at the English-language *Moscow Times* since 1992—about the rage I felt pulsing through Butusov's *Seagull*. This, he replies, is the anger and frustration inherent in any artistic endeavor, particularly a collaborative one like theatre; Butusov's riotous deconstruction, in fact, is all about the theatre and his anguished place in it.

Perhaps. But it was hard to not experience this assaultive *Seagull*—in which the despairing writer Treplev, played by Timofei Tribuntsev, plays crucial late scenes with his head

shrouded in a bloody shirt, and a sprawling dinner scene pauses to inhale the vapors of T Bone Burnett's fatalistic blues “It's Not Too Late”—as an expression, at least in part, of a more immediate discontent. This was April, after all, on the occasion of the annual Golden Mask Festival, a sort of best-of-the-year theatre Olympics held each year in Moscow. And as that month sat poised uneasily between the widely dreaded reelection of Vladimir Putin in March and his reinstatement as Supreme Leader—sorry, Prime Minister—in May, I was inclined to see everything on the stages of this urbane, muscular capital city through the lens of a divisive and complicated post-post-Soviet moment in Russian culture and politics.

Whether it was reimagined classics (Butusov's *Seagull*, Konstantin Bogomolov's gender-bent *Lear: A Comedy*) or the no-frills mix of devised and documentary storytelling lately emerging from tiny hipster companies like Teatr.doc and Praktika Theatre, the Russian works I saw in April resonated with the nation's disharmony and unease—with the terrible sense that its illiberal past has seeped back into the neoliberal present, snuffing out hopes for a truly liberal future—in varying registers of defiance, melancholy and resignation.

Put another way: Though all the shows at this year's Golden Mask were originally created before the last half-year-or-so of fresh protest against the naked reemergence



DARIA PICHUGINA

Rose Khayrullina in the gender-bent *Lear*. A Comedy.

of Putin's so-called "sovereign democracy," the hot-and-cold emotions driving them, and circulating through the audiences, felt startlingly immediate. I guess that's why we call it live theatre.

EVEN AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE

Soviet Union more than 20 years ago, Russia's state-run repertory theatres remain remarkably resilient, at least by American standards. Elena Kovalskaya, who curated Russian Case 2012, a sampler for international visitors of the larger Golden Mask, put the number of companies at 88, while Freedman referred to 115 companies in Moscow alone. The discrepancy in their figures may reflect a post-Soviet reality: Not only has a thriving commercial theatre bubbling over with popular comedies and musicals sprung up to divert Moscow's flush middle class, but a clutch of small companies, independently funded and managed, has emerged to serve the city's more discerning intelligentsia.

At the undisputed hub, if not exactly the helm, of this indie theatre scene is Teatr.doc, a tiny 60-seat black box theatre not far from the Pushkinskaya Metro station. Founded in 2002 by playwright and screenwriter Elena Gremina, Teatr.doc, as the "doc" in its name suggests, began with the practice of documentary or "verbatim theatre" as its mission. This was no accident: In 1999, representatives of London's Royal Court Theatre came to Moscow to lead a workshop on techniques, by then well established in the English-speaking theatre, of conducting interviews



POLINA KOROLIOVA

Arina Marakulina and Ilyas Tamayev in Sasha Denisova's *Light My Fire*, at Teatr.doc.

and collecting documents around a subject or a community and turning those into a play.

Initial efforts included such works as 2003's *War of the Moldovans for a cardboard box*, fashioned by Alexander Rodionov from

interviews with migrant workers in Moscow, and Gremina's own *September.doc*, a response to the harrowing and bloody 2004 Beslan school siege. But events of recent years have sharpened the urgency of the theatre's mission: Gremina's *One Hour Eighteen* (2009) is a stark account of the miserable death of a whistle-blowing lawyer, Sergei Magnitsky, while in prison on trumped-up charges.

This year's Golden Mask offering from Teatr.doc, *Two in Your House*, also by Gremina, takes a lighter tone in depicting another real-life injustice, albeit one with a far less grim ending: the four-month house arrest in Belarus of opposition candidate and poet Vladimir Neklyae, in which he and his wife played unwilling host to a rotating series of KGB officers until charges were finally dismissed. Staged simply on chairs in front of a backdrop showing the close quarters of the apartment layout, *Two in Your House* has at its center a flawlessly deadpan performance by playwright Maksym Kurochkin (*Vodka, Fucking, and Television*) as Neklyae. Dressed in jeans and a Darth Vader T-shirt, the phlegmatic, bespectacled Kurochkin embodies a new, sneakily powerful style of

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resistance: unflappable, ironic, matter-of-factly subversive.

Indeed, as in the States, Russia's indie theatres—not only in Moscow but in St. Petersburg, where On.Teatr has made a splash staging new Russian drama as well as translations of plays by Charles L. Mee and Annie Baker—are showcases for what might be called a kind of hipster dissidence, distinguished less by anger or indignation than by a playful aesthetic openness, a disarming directness and lack of fuss.

This could be seen as a bracingly sane response to a disorienting political moment. Last December, when protestors spontaneously took to the streets after parliamentary elections generally regarded as rigged, many hoped the nation was on the verge of its own Russian Spring. Since then, however, as both sides hardened their positions and Putin's reelection became increasingly inevitable, many of Russia's liberals have been demoralized in a way that roughly resembles the widespread disbelief and disaffection among U.S. liberals after George W. Bush's 2004 reelection. For Teatr.doc's Gremina, however, this turn of events only stiffens her spine.



POLINA KOROLEVA

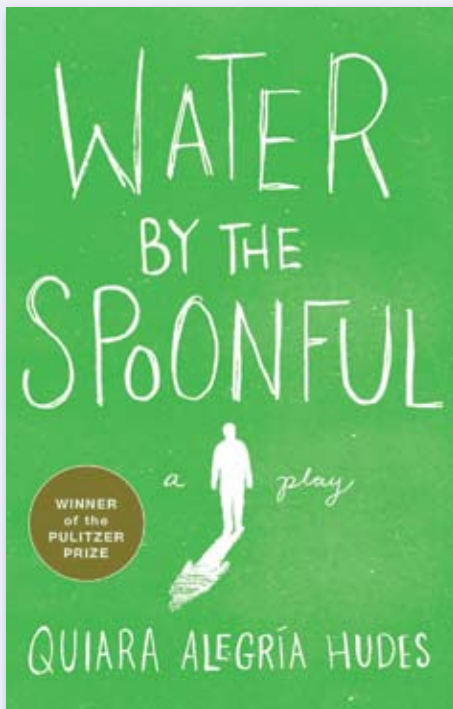
Alexei Maslodudov, Maksym Kurochkin and Oleg Kamenschikov in Teatr.doc's *Two in Your House*.

“Even more now, with the next 112 years of Putin in power, our position is that we should be totally independent, without state money,” she says in a coffeehouse interview, with director Yury Urnov on hand to translate. Currently running at her theatre, though not on the Golden Mask program, is a pointed adaptation of Dario Fo's *The Double Headed Anomaly*, here retitled *BerlusPutin*, which

imagines an ungodly monster-mashup of Italy's and Russia's discredited heads of state. “We were thinking that the night we opened everybody would get arrested, but nothing happened,” she notes.

Gremina, who staged her first plays after the fall of the Soviet Union, didn't start out with an oppositional agenda. “I never thought I would write a political play. We built Teatr.

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MIKHAIL GUTERMAN

The kitsch-tinged promenade *Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-de-Boom* from director Dmitry Krymov.

doc first of all because we wanted to have a place to do theatre which is interesting to us from the artistic perspective. Later, step by step, those very important political projects started knocking at our doors. We didn't want them. It's like *Six Characters in Search of An Author*—reality is searching for the author. Now that reality knows the way and the door to knock on, people actually send us letters

now and they say, 'Here is a horrible story,' or, 'Here is a wonderful story.'"

Not all of Teatr.doc's offerings are politically charged; in one future project, male performers will reenact interviews with women about childbearing. That brand of humanizing storytelling—evocative of the work of the U.S. troupe the Civilians—is also practiced by another hip, young Mos-

cow theatre, Praktika, whose Golden Mask offerings included the ironic media satire *Zhara (The Heat)*, the sweet interview-based appreciate-your-grandmothers piece *Babushki Grannies*, and the Bergmanesque mystery, entirely fictional but delivered in a rivetingly plain documentary style, *Illusions*.

The strongest Golden Mask offering from this indie-theatre scene exemplified a freewheeling aesthetic eclecticism that might be recognized by fans of Austin, Texas's Rude Mechanicals. Sasha Denisova's *Light My Fire* (also at Teatr.doc) blends documentary techniques with sketch comedy and rock-and-roll, giving dead-by-27 rockers Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix a remix at once both raucous and intimate. In Denisova's beguiling conceit, actors slip effortlessly between broad, ballsy stabs at Famous Rock Moments—some lip-synched to loud playback, some screamingly funny, all stunningly successful—and quiet diary readings from the actors' own contemporary Russian lives that redirect the larger story's pop-cultural, and countercultural, currents in fresh and provocative ways. I doubted that anyone could make the legendary music and

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mayhem of these three overexposed icons feel freshly revolutionary, but that's exactly what Denisova and company, under director Yury Muravitsky, have done.

LIGHT MY FIRE WENT ON TO WIN THE Golden Mask's "innovation" award, and Butusov took home a directing award for his rageaholic *Seagull*. I also saw the festival's large-scale winner, Andrei Moguchy and Konstantin Filippov's *Happiness*, an elaborately odd and intermittently gorgeous melding of avant-garde and children's theatre tropes for a retelling of Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird*; Alexander Shishkin also took home a deserved award for his witty and surprisingly multilayered design. I have to admit that this show, as well as a non-competing presentation of Dmitry Krymov's justly beloved "promenade" production, *Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-de-Boom* (imagine a Chekhov-themed Cirque du Soleil show with a light garnish of Soviet kitsch), did not quite fit the protest/resistance narrative I read into nearly everything else.

But behind the scenes, divisions are roiling. A new production of Dostoyevsky's *The Demons* by the 94-year-old Yury Lyubimov,



A scene from Moguchy's *Happiness*, based on Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird*.

though not on the Golden Mask roster, was the talk of the festival: Was this former lion of theatrical dissidents, who had rancorously parted ways with his famous Taganka Theatre the previous year, making an anti-liberal statement with his staging? Accusations and countercharges of pro- or anti-government sentiments now fly regularly between theatre artists.

For some, state funding has become tainted.

"Actors from major companies were forced or extorted into making videos for Putin," reports the *Moscow Times's* Freedman. "It's not a quite a schism, but it's close to that, between state theatres and independent theatres along pro- and anti-Putin lines."

The division, he notes, is as much aesthetic and organizational as political. "There was a meeting of future leaders of the theatre at Meyerhold Centre last year, and I got in some trouble for defending the Russian repertory system, which I told them is the envy of the world. But all the young people here agree: It has to go." He calls theirs a "very Russian approach, a radical approach: tear the whole system down and start again."

For her part, Gremina isn't interested in tearing anything down, just building and maintaining her own playground.

"We don't need to break everything so everywhere will be just like us," she says. "But I hoped—I still hope—that we are building a new social model. Our usual theatres are kind of an imitation of the patriarchal state—they're pyramids with gods on top, and that's totally uninteresting for me. I like the open communities where people come together because they're interested in each other, and interested in coming together. I always say that our place is for freaks and losers."

In a country where the right of free association seems fragile again—not to mention a place where a troubling new tide of antigay legislation is emerging—the most radical step may be not to tear down statues or state monopolies but to gather in theatres, tell the stories no one else will tell, and occasionally crank up the rock-and-roll. 🎪

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Alexander Gemignani and Krysta Rodriguez in *Saint-Ex* Photo: Jamie Schriell

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