Moscow Performances

The New Russian Theater 1991–1996

John Freedman

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The New Russian Theater 1991–1996

by John Freedman

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Cover illustration: Vasily Bochkaryov in A.K.Tolstoy's *Tsar Boris* at the Maly Theater, directed by Vladimir Beilis. Photo: Alexander Ivanishin.

To Alma Law

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

The Russian Theatre Archive makes available in English the best avant-garde plays from the pre-Revolutionary period to the present day. It features monographs on major playwrights and theatre directors, introductions to previously unknown works, and studies of the main artistic groups and periods.

Plays are presented in performing edition translations, including (where appropriate) musical scores, and instructions for music and dance. Whenever possible the translated texts will be accompanied by videotapes of performances of plays in the original language.

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PREFACE

This book records my impressions of some of the five hundred or so theatrical performances I have seen in Moscow between 1991 and 1996. In addition to the main "genre" of the book—reviews written for various publications—there are a number of feature or news articles which go behind the scenes of some of the most important events of the period.

In the five years I have been writing regularly about theater in Moscow, I have had the unique opportunity to gain insight into the trends and developments that characterize not only Moscow, but Russia as a whole. I have seen numerous productions by theaters from Chelyabinsk to Voronezh, and have been able to compare them to touring shows by many of the top theaters and directors of the world. In all, during the half-decade covered in this book, I have observed the work of about 250 directors for 150 theaters from 35 cities in 20 countries.

As Russia's theatrical capital, Moscow naturally draws ideas and inspiration from the hinterlands as well as sending them outward. Even such a unique vision as that of Lev Dodin, the artistic director of St Petersburg's Maly Drama Theater, is clearly a development of ideas and forms that originated with Yury Lyubimov at the Taganka Theater. Also, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow remains a common ground for several non-Russian traditions which have heavily influenced and been influenced by Russian theater. That is why when such brilliant directors as Eimuntas Nekrosius from Lithuania and Robert Sturua from Georgia bring their work to Moscow, the events have an undeniable feeling of homecoming, occasionally tinged with controversy.

Moscow's position as a world theater center has increased manifold with the removal of the old boundaries that once set the Soviet bloc off from the West. Peter Stein's realization in 1994 of his longtime wish to work in Russia was eloquent proof of that.

Russia in the first half of the 1990s changed rapidly, often and radically. Perhaps more than anything, it was a time of collapses—of the Soviet Union, coup attempts, ideals, economic programs, legal revisions, political reforms and even a communist revanche. This had a lot of people singing dirges and, in many cases, understandably so. But another side of disintegration is the ferment and growth which come of it. And it is a fact that, for all the shocking problems of instability, corruption, poverty and war which had gripped Russia by the mid-'90s, the country had taken significant steps toward becoming more open and flexible than it had been since the second decade of the present century.

Naturally, none of these trends failed to find expression in the realm of theater, for over 200 years one of Russia's key cultural and social mirrors. The collapse of Soviet theater—with its encoded, "Aesopian" language telling unspeakable truths, its often virtuosic use of the classics to tackle contemporary problems, and its general focus on social themes as opposed to individual, personal issues—had some observers bewailing the death of Russian theater. What was really going on, of course, was a process of

renewal. But like all revitalization processes, this one was chaotic, confusing and often crass.

Many doubted that the directors whose names began cropping up were worthy of replacing such authorities as Anatoly Efros and the Leningrad-based Georgy Tovstonogov, who had died in 1987 and 1989 respectively. Anatoly Vasilyev, after a brilliant start in the 1970s and ’80s, disappeared into seclusion at his School of Dramatic Art. Openly admitting that he had no interest in or toleration of the realities of modern life, at least as they were manifested in Moscow, he conducted semi-private experiments with his students while occasionally going abroad to stage shows.

Yury Lyubimov did in 1989 what was always assumed impossible—he returned, sort of, from exile—but it wasn’t the same Lyubimov, it wasn’t the same Taganka and it wasn’t the same Russia. He had his artistic successes and failures in the 1990s, but all were overshadowed by the bitter breakup of the once-proud Taganka Theater into warring factions.

The biggest crisis concerned playwriting. It was not, as many suggested, that writers had stopped writing plays. That opinion was a superficial misconception caused by the fact that in the late 1980s a few old guard Soviet playwrights did, indeed, fall silent.

Alexander Gelman quit composing industrial potboilers and went into politics for a while. With the demise of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Shatrov no longer had reason to churn out revisionist history plays about Bolshevik leaders. Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, never an officially sanctioned playwright, was able to go back to what she really preferred—prose. She had only begun writing plays because in Soviet times nobody would publish her stories. Edvard Radzinsky found a new career writing bestselling books on Russian and Soviet historical themes for foreign markets.

Thus arose the myth of the collapse of modern dramatic writing. In fact, the problem actually was that the directors raised and educated in the Soviet period did not know what to do with the plays being written and so they did not stage them. Even the younger directors often bore the stamp of their teachers’ limitations. In the relatively few instances of contemporary plays being staged in the early ’90s, rigid realism, pointed historical parallels and social principles were often forced upon them rudely and with dismal results.

There were a few striking exceptions to this rule, and mixed signs in the 1995–96 season suggested that the situation was on the verge of changing. If that is true, it was thanks in some degree to the journal, *Playwright,* founded in 1993 by the “older” playwrights Alexei Kazantsev and Mikhail Roshchin. That periodical featured the works of Yelena Gremina, Olga Mukhina, Nadezhda Ptushkina, Mikhail Ugarov, Maria Arbatova and many other talented writers still struggling for recognition.

On the whole, however, contemporary playwrights had tough going in the first half of the 1990s.

The reverse side of the coin was the passionate love affair which arose with the classics. The plays of Ostrovsky, Chekhov and Gogol, and adaptations of Dostoevsky’s prose were produced in staggering numbers. The approaches ran the gamut from the purely traditional to the distinctly experimental, but there could be no doubt that as the last decade of the 20th century progressed, people were still looking for inspiration and wisdom in the works of the Golden Age of the 19th century.

The late 1980s had seen an explosion of interest in many of the formerly banned plays written in the 1920s and 1930s. Nikolai Erdman, Mikhail Bulgakov, Yury Olesha, Andrei Platonov, Isaak Babel and other forgotten or partially forgotten authors seemed finally to have taken their rightful place in the Russian repertoire. But it was a short-lived phenomenon. In the first half of the ’90s they seemed to die again as quickly as they had been resurrected. The few attempts to interpret the largely poetic drama of the Silver Age of the first decades of the 20th century produced little of lasting interest.

These pages reflect the organizational shifts which occurred with the displacement, but not removal, of a centralized (communist) system. Almost immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, one saw the first appearance of independent production companies and private theaters. They pioneered the search for private funding which federal and municipal theaters soon found themselves scrambling for as well. Inflation, combined with substantial cuts in state sponsorship, hurt most theaters financially in the early ’90s. But by mid-decade, state spending on culture was again on the rise, and most venues had found ways to augment their income by renting out space for offices, installing currency exchange windows or opening restaurants or night clubs on their premises.

The Moscow theatrical topography bore several scars left over from the late 1980s, a time when people drunk on the notion of independence often fell into crippling schisms and bickering. Breakups shook the Taganka, the Yermolova, the Nemirovich-Danchenko Musical Theater and others, although the one that set the standard took place in 1987 at the Moscow Art Theater.

This international icon of theater, then approaching its 90th birthday, was the first to let its internal squabbles go public when it split into two independent troupes, both of which retained the right to use the prestigious Art Theater symbols and name. The company which moved into a newly constructed building on Tverskoi Boulevard kept the Soviet-era name of the Gorky Moscow Art Theater. The one which remained in the “house that Stanislavsky built” on Kamergersky Lane soon took the name of the Chekhov Moscow Art Theater.

Several new theaters arose, of which a few survived. The highly touted Learned Monkey, formed from a graduating class at the Shchukin Institute in 1992 hardly got off the ground before disappearing without a whimper. The Sarkisov Theater Group existed for a few years as an independent company playing most often in the Stanislavsky Memorial Museum. In 1996 it dissolved into the new Theater D, headed by the leading actor Armen Dzhigarkhanyan. The Moscow Salon which enjoyed such an impressive start in 1994 never put out a second show.

The unquestioned star of the new venues was the Fomenko Studio, created on the basis of Pyotr Fomenko’s 1993 graduating class of actors and directors. The Studio lived through some rocky times, perhaps best exemplified by its 1994 production of *The Puppet Booth,* based on two plays by Alexander Blok. Staged especially for a Paris premiere, it received lukewarm responses in France and flopped when it returned to Moscow where it played only three times before closing. A visually gorgeous but bracingly empty show, it raised questions about the company’s readiness for all the attention it was getting. But in time, the young crew proved itself, becoming one of the most successful venues in town.

Meanwhile the physical image of the city itself transformed dramatically. When I wrote about Anatoly Vasilyev's School of Dramatic Art in 1992, I noted the enormous number of abandoned buildings lining Moscow's streets. By 1996 they were not all gone, to be sure, but the city was undergoing an extraordinary wave of reconstruction. In fact, the entire neighborhood around Vasilyev's theater on Sretenka Street was taking on the look of a high-rent district.

Reconstruction of theaters themselves was also in full swing. In 1995 alone, Vasilyev unveiled his spectacular, reconstructed quarters on Povarskaya Street, the Maly Theater reopened its opulent, refurbished affiliate on Ordynka Street, and the Theater na Pokrovke opened a sleek, modern new home.

Readers may note a few discrepancies in street names throughout the course of the book. In this time of upheaval, names and titles seemed to change with the weather, often the result of attempts to restore the original prerevolutionary names. Thus, the Chekhov Art Theater seems to "move" from Art Theater Lane to Kamergersky Lane, Vasilyev's base for the School of Dramatic Art from Vorovsky Street to Povarskaya Street, the Lenkom Theater from Chekhov Street to Malaya Dmitrovka Street. Students who entered the State Institute of Theater Arts (GITIS) in 1991, received their diploma four years later from the Russian Academy of Theater Arts (RATI).

My aim in collecting these articles was to bring the diversity, energy and imagination of the living Moscow theater process—with its beauty spots and warts—to readers who may be drawn to the Russian tradition for any number of reasons. For some, the interest in Russian theater and drama comes from the plays of Anton Chekhov. For others it may be the writings of Konstantin Stanislavsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Mikhail Chekhov. In recent times, tours abroad by companies large and small, from the Taganka Theater to the spunky South-West Theater Studio, have brought the "real thing" to audiences who would otherwise never have had a chance to experience it.

Russian directors are increasingly invited to stage shows in the West. Kama Ginkas works more in Finland than in Russia. Sergei Zhenovach has become a frequent guest in Norway. Vladimir Mirzoyev spent several years in Canada and Valery Belyakovich has realized several projects in Japan. Lev Stukalov of Omsk enjoyed success with a dramatization of Dostoevsky's *The Gambler* in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, while Mark Weil of Tashkent (he also occasionally works in Moscow) staged Gogol's *The Inspector General* in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Even actors have found ways to cut across language barriers, sometimes performing (as Oleg Menshikov has in London and Paris), sometimes teaching (as Yevgeny Lazarev has in Atlanta, Georgia, Alexander Feklistov in Toronto, or Alexander Kalyagin in Paris). And yet the atmosphere and the milieu in which these people live and create at home remains little more than an amorphous shadow for most Westerners.

* * *

To describe this time of transition, many observers have latched onto the words "crisis," "decline" or "death"; I generally, though not always, avoid them. At first as an outsider (I have lived in Moscow since 1988), and later as a transplanted "local," I have always been struck by the vitality of the searching going on. For all the pessimism and sarcasm that infiltrates Moscow's impression of itself, I firmly believe that the first half of the 1990s unleashed a variety of styles, directions, approaches and talents which will

lead to the innovations of the future. Meanwhile, the best efforts of this short period have already made their mark on history.

Whether by coincidence or unseen design, two of my earliest reviews, and the first entries about Moscow-based shows in this collection, were about productions by a pair of directors who emerged atop the short list of Moscow's best: Kama Ginkas and Pyotr Fomenko.

After nearly two decades of skitting from city to city, creating unorthodox, wrenching and compelling theater in out-of-the-way venues and apartment rooms, Ginkas found something of a home in Moscow in the late 1980s. By the mid-'90s he had gained worldwide recognition for his unique, personal and fine-tuned productions.

But it was Pyotr Fomenko who most universally symbolized the notions of excellence and regeneration in the early post-Soviet years. Born in 1932, and having begun his career in 1960, Fomenko was anything but a new name. He had worked as an assistant with Lyubimov on two shows in 1965, simultaneously staging his own production of Alexander Sukhovo-Kobylin's *The Death of Tarelkin* at the Mayakovsky Theater. But that show ran into censorship trouble, as did his 1967 production of Peter Weiss's *The Investigation* for the Taganka.

During the 1970s Fomenko worked at various venues in Moscow and Leningrad and made several movies of the classics for television. From 1977 to 1981 he was the chief director at the Leningrad Theater of Comedy, but was forced to leave that post for political reasons. He then returned to Moscow to teach at the State Institute of Theater Arts and stage several popular productions for the Mayakovsky and Vakhtangov theaters. But nobody was prepared for what he would seem suddenly to achieve in the early '90s.

Fomenko's 1993 production for the Vakhtangov Theater of *Guilty Without Guilt,* Alexander Ostrovsky's classic backstage melodrama, was a bona fide sensation, the stuff of which legends are made. To a certain extent it had the great fortune of catching people at a point when they were finally getting tired of bemoaning the sorry state of all things theatrical. They wanted to praise something beautiful, touching and exhilarating, and Fomenko gave it to them with a vengeance.

Also by this time, a talented group of students Fomenko was teaching at the Russian Academy of Theater Arts was attracting the kind of attention students rarely do. (They would soon become the Fomenko Studio.) This phenomenon, together with the scintillating *Guilty Without Guilt* and the perceived dearth of quality in Moscow's shows, focused a glaring spotlight on Fomenko as a leader and a savior. When he followed with another dazzling show in 1994, Fernand Crommelynck's *The Magnificent Cuckold* at the Satirikon Theater, his position as Moscow's number one director was confirmed.

It is fascinating now to look back at Fomenko's 1991 production of *Sovereign, Our Father* and at his 1996 production of *The Queen of Spades,* both done for the Vakhtangov Theater. They were similar in that each was meticulously constructed and shot through with subtle detail, although neither expressed everything Fomenko was after. The difference is that *Sovereign* was the work of a respected director, while *The Queen of Spades* was already the product of a "master." That transition is observed in the following pages.

Another name that became a sign of the times is Valery Fokin. After making a reputation for himself in the '70s and '80s at the Sovremennik and the Yermolova

Theaters (his 1985 production of *Speak!* at the Yermolova was one of the first to proclaim the arrival of perestroika) he suddenly found himself at the center of a storm.

He was at the helm of the Yermolova when an actors' revolt split the house in two in 1989. That garnered him some bad press, and more of it came with his much ridiculed dramatization of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* under the title of *The Demoness*. (It was a short-lived show which I did not see.) The howls did not end when he left the Yermolova to found an ambitious international cultural organization called the Meyerhold Center.

It could hardly have been a coincidence that Fokin left Russia for a couple of years in the early '90s to work in Poland, Switzerland, Germany and Japan. The road abroad, of course, was one no Russian artist had taken voluntarily for some 70 years, although it was one that several, including Vladimir Mirzoyev and Roman Kozak, would soon embark on. But they, like Fokin, eventually found themselves longing for the commitment, maybe even fanaticism, of the Russian approach to theater, and they returned.

Fokin made his Moscow comeback with a superb production in 1994 of *A Hotel Room in the Town of N* (based on Nikolai Gogol's novel, *Dead Souls*). It easily turned the critics' former jeers to cheers. His brilliant 1995 dramatization of Kafka's story, "The Metamorphosis," at the Satirikon Theater sealed the critics' renewed acceptance of him and put his reputation more or less on a par with Fomenko and Ginkas.

Other key figures of the period include Mikhail Levitin, the artistic director at the Hermitage Theater, Konstantin Raikin, the leading actor and artistic director at the Satirikon Theater, Sergei Zhenovach, a staff director at the Malaya Bronnaya Theater, and Roman Viktyuk, the flamboyant, prolific and highly uneven director who achieved genuine mass popularity for his open treatment of homosexual themes.

I mention Levitin not so much because of any specific production, but because his theater had a rare consistency of purpose. At a time when almost any theater was capable of putting out a good show, but few were able to create a sense of artistic unity over time, the Hermitage stood out as a house with its own clearly defined aesthetic. Levitin applies to his theatrical extravaganzas the principles of the Russian literary absurdists from the 1920s—the Oberiu.

The name of Raikin is one of Russia's most famous and beloved. Arkady Raikin, Konstantin's father, was probably the greatest Russian comic of the 20th century. When he died in 1987, his son took over his theater and soon indicated that he would not merely be following in his father's footsteps: He invited Roman Viktyuk to stage Jean Genet's *The Maids,* the 1988 premiere of which, starring male actors in all the roles, was a landmark production.

It was not until 1994 and 1995, however, when Raikin brought in first Pyotr Fomenko and then Valery Fokin to create vehicles for himself as an actor, that the Satirikon really hit its stride. By the time Raikin himself produced a sparkling version of *Romeo and Juliet* at the end of 1995, he had proved himself Moscow's shrewdest theater manager and his theater had unquestionably become one of the best in town.

The case of Sergei Zhenovach is rather more complex. Even the casual reader will notice my obsession with him, my repeated efforts to respond adequately to his productions. He has been hailed by some as the heir apparent to Anatoly Efros (one of his teachers) and dismissed by others as a competent craftsman lacking imagination. It is no secret that I am inclined to accept the latter definition. At the same time, I do not believe

in absolutes, especially when it comes to judging art. The reader should therefore be forewarned that my skepticism in regards to Zhenovach puts me in the minority among Moscow critics.

Roman Viktyuk, on the other hand, has not been especially well thought of by the critics since he turned from being the premier, semi-underground interpreter of works by Lyudmila Petrushevskaya to being the champion of homoeroticism in theater. There is in that response a heavy dose of homophobia. It seldom makes it into print, but anyone who cares to has heard enough to know the prejudices that weigh against Viktyuk. The quality of the director's work is another story altogether.

As Viktyuk's popularity with audiences—and thus the demand for his services—grew, he began slapping shows together at an alarming rate, often staging a half-dozen or more in a single season, some in Moscow, others in the Russian provinces or abroad. It showed in the final product. While the first offerings of what might be called the liberated Viktyuk had a fresh sense of discovery and daring, the subsequent productions became increasingly superficial and repetitive.

There was a pause in Viktyuk's decline with the heartfelt 1994 production of Nikolai Kolyada's *The Oginski Polonaise,* but it was short-lived. Subsequent outings such as *Love with an Idiot* (1995) and *The Philosophy of the Boudoir* (1996) were so vapid that even Viktyuk's loyal following began abandoning him.

Other directors deserving of special attention are Sergei Artsibashev, Yury Pogrebnichko and Andrei Zhitinkin. The first two, though artists of vastly different styles, both went through apprenticeships in the early 1980s under Yury Lyubimov at the Taganka—Artsibashev as an assistant and staff director, Pogrebnichko as an actor and director.

Artsibashev comes from a small country village, but professionally he is a product of the Moscow milieu, having worked his entire career in the capital. He began making a name for himself after creating his own theater, the Theater na Pokrovke, in 1991. His stated purpose from the outset was to focus on Russian classical drama and, indeed, all of his noteworthy productions have involved interpretations of works written in the 19th century.

Born in Odessa in 1939, Pogrebnichko graduated from the Leningrad State Institute of Theater, Music and Cinema in 1968. While working for Lyubimov in the early '80s, he frequently traveled and staged shows in such Russian cities as Vladimir, Bryansk, Tver, Lysva, Novokuznetsk and Krasnoyarsk. In 1983 he was appointed the chief director of the Kamchatka Regional Drama Theater, where he remained until 1987. At that time he was invited to take over Moscow's once popular Krasnaya Presnya Youth Studio which had entered something of an identity crisis. Pogrebnichko's strange, understated, underplayed and heavily ironic productions immediately gave the theater a new image and new life.

Andrei Zhitinkin is a young director who has parlayed a slick, undeniable talent into a controversial prominence. Often drubbed by the critics, he has had an impressive string of popular hits. In part these shows have been fueled by the presence of famous actors, but it is also obvious that stars want to work with him because they know he will show them off well. The director is also known for happily tweaking the conservative tastes that still reign in Moscow. His treatments of homosexuality and his occasional use of male and female nudity have more than once raised eyebrows and ire both.

As Roman Viktyuk's reputation has declined, Zhitinkin has emerged as perhaps the top author of what are often derisively called "commercial" productions. At his best, as in the moving 1995 revival of Alexei Arbuzov's *My Poor Marat,* he has displayed a fresh, sensitive touch.

* * *

A few words should be said about what has gone into this book and how it appears. The articles are all reprinted from original publications in the *Moscow Guardian,* the *Moscow Times, Slavic and East European Performance* or *Plays International*. Unless noted otherwise, the source is the *Moscow Times*. Dates indicate the time of publication which, in the case of *Slavic and East European Performance* and *Plays International,* leaves a gap between the event and the appearance of my accounts. I have placed the articles to reflect the order in which productions appeared.

Except in a few instances, my editing has been restricted to correcting factual errors, cutting repetitive phrases or removing purely local or temporal information. Because of the nature of newspaper publishing, the *Times* articles were occasionally shortened to fit available space. The versions printed here restore some sentences or paragraphs which did not make the first cut.

A handful of segments differ substantially from the originals. The interview article with Peter Stein is nearly twice as long as what was published, while some of the articles about touring companies and festivals omit non-Russian productions.

The *Times* review of Oleg Antonov's *The Death-Defying Act* has been altered to correspond to what I later wrote for *Slavic and East European Performance* after seeing the playscript. This is an isolated but telling sign of the hazards of writing theater reviews; my original interpretation of some of the play's plot complications (though not its meaning, significance or quality) proved faulty.

In no case have I softened or sharpened my original praise or criticism.

A problem of another kind occasionally arose because my wife, Oksana Mysina, is an actress in Moscow. Consequently, I hasten to point out those instances when our paths crossed professionally. The only show in which she participated and which is reviewed here is the Spartacus Square Theater's *The Joyous Days of Rasplyuyev*. She played a secondary role and I did not write about her. Later, to avoid conflicts of interest and still do my job of covering noteworthy events, I did interviews with her directors, Boris Lvov-Anokhin *(The Aspern Papers)* and Kama Ginkas *(K.I. from "Crime").* I make passing reference to another show she did with Lvov-Anokhin *(A Heroic Comedy)* in an article about trends in the 1994–95 season.

As for the inevitably clumsy transition which names and titles must make from Russian to English, I always made choices with the interest of the general reader in mind. I tend to translate or anglicize theater names, hoping to walk a fine line between ease of reading and recognition of what is essentially a trademark.

A few venues, such as Theater u Nikitskikh vorot (Theater at Nikitsky Gates), Chelovek ("Human") Theater-Studio and Theater na Pokrovke (Theater on Pokrovka Street) have acquired reputations in the English-speaking world under their Russian names, so I leave them untouched.

Translated names include: Young Spectator Theater for *Teatr yunogo zritelya,* Contemporary Play School for *Shkola sovremennoi pesy,* South-West Theater-Studio for

Teatr-studia na Yugo-Zapade, Learned Monkey for *Uchyonaya obezyana,* Commonwealth of Taganka Actors for *Sodruzhestvo aktyorov Taganki*.

Anglicized names include: Krasnaya Presnya Theater for *Teatr na Krasnoi Presne,* Malaya Bronnaya Theater for *Teatr na Maloi Bronnoi,* Spartacus Square Theater for *Teatr na Spartakovskoi ploshchadi,* Taganka Theater for *Teatr na Taganke,* ACTors ARTel for *ARTel ARTistov*.

In most cases, I drop the designation of "studio" from theater names since it is usually dropped in general and even official usage. The exceptions are the South-West Theater-Studio and the Chelovek Theater-Studio which proudly hold onto their full names as a statement of sorts.

In most cases, I drop the epithets of "State" and "Academic" from theater names. I anglicize the spelling of some Russian names, such as Maxim, Alexander, Alexei (and their derivatives). I also anglicize a few non-Russian names, such as Heifetz (rather than Kheifets) and Weil (rather than Vail), while others I leave in their Russian form (such as Lia, rather than Leah).

Finally, it is a genuine pleasure for me to thank the people standing behind this book.

Jacqueline Hemmer, whom I met in the summer of 1991 at a performance of the Sibilyov Studio, told me of a new English-language weekly called the *Moscow Guardian* and suggested I write for it.

Betsy McKay, now a Moscow correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal,* was the trusting editor who asked me to hack out an article on the spot and was generous enough to invite me along when the *Guardian* became the *Moscow Times* in 1992.

The *Times,* beginning as a shaky but sincere semi-weekly, soon grew into a strong and popular daily. It has been my good fortune that its publisher, Derk Sauer, and its editors-in-chief, first Michael Hetzer, then Meg Bortin and now Marc Champion, have felt that, in Moscow, theater coverage is crucial even for a foreign-language paper.

I have been blessed to write for talented editors, including Karen Dukess; the delightfully mysterious Daisy Sindelar; Margaret Henry, my friend and soul sister in affairs of the arts; and Frank Brown, a James Brown fanatic, which just about says it all. Others making the *Times* a great paper to write for have been Brenda Gray, Jana Janus, Kelly Leichenko and Katya Turchina.

As the editors of *Slavic and East European Performance,* Daniel Gerould and Alma Law have generously given me access to readers in the United States, while Peter Roberts, the editor of *Plays International,* has kindly given me an outlet in England.

All of these friends and colleagues have made it possible for me to do what for a westerner would have sounded half insane a few years ago: to observe at close hand the evolution of the Russian theater tradition and to make a living writing about it.

Moscow, 1996

PERFORMANCES

1991/1992 SEASON

The Nose, Lithuanian State Youth Theater

The appearance of Eimuntas Nekrosius's *The Nose* in Moscow, performed by the Lithuanian State Youth Theater in collaboration with the Moscow Friendship of Nationalities Theater, was timely, indeed. Opening September 21, 1991, exactly a month after the unraveling of the coup and a few weeks after Lithuania regained independence, it created one of Moscow's biggest theatrical sensations since the advent of perestroika. The opening night audience was a genuine who's who of Moscow society while the crowds hoping to find a stray ticket outside the dowdy Pushkin Theater reminded one of the Taganka or Lenkom in the "old days."

Responses broke down predictably. The full houses applauded enthusiastically while critics and "people in the know" whispered quietly that the production was "nothing new": "If he had done this five years ago, it would really have been something," one well-connected person told me, "but now…" Nekrosius himself seemed to anticipate such a reaction in an interview printed in a booklet sold with the program where he called the notion of creating art for the elite "a nice cliché," but "otherwise, nonsense."

Perhaps I was fortunate never to have seen a Nekrosius production, but I couldn't help but feel that—with the removal of one set of political obstacles to art—the dual response was merely a case of politics once again taking precedence over art.

Certainly, Nekrosius himself did not shy from making political allusions. Instead of losing his nose, this Kovalyov (Vladas Bagdonas) attempts to relieve himself of a troublesome attraction to the opposite sex by voluntarily submitting to castration (whimsically achieved by the vicious swing of an ax, followed by the appearance of a dangling pink ribbon to indicate flowing blood). However, shortly after the madcap doctor (played with engaging deviltry by Povilas Budris) tosses Kovalyov's member in a trash can, the still bloody "nose" emerges in a pink shirt and something resembling a pink yarmulke to pursue its own life and troubles in a new-found state of "freedom." This presents plenty of opportunities for Nekrosius to echo the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, as well as the devastating problems that has engendered.

In one of several such touches, the "nose" attempts to marry a beautiful maiden, eliciting the jealous wrath of Kovalyov who enters in a fascist goose-step and attempts to steal the bride. A comic scuffle ensues, the result being that both of them become her groom. In such ways, Nekrosius teases his audience with the irresolvable paradoxes of a desire for independence and the necessity of interdependence. In any case, Kovalyov's subsequent efforts to coerce the "nose" to return to its proper place are in vain. Standing erect with a new-found sense of potency, and echoing Kovalyov's "fascist" tendencies, the "nose" eventually goes on a rampage and has everyone locked up in trash-bin prisons.

These scenes are far from being programmatic allegories; on one level they may hint at familiar historical and political events, but they neither attempt to represent or resolve them. The "confusing element"—that is, the artistic image that ultimately leads away from politics into the realm of art or philosophy—is the figure of the beautiful maiden who appears in several scenes, perhaps representing a concept similar to "truth," "beauty," or "justice." Naturally, the intent is not to illustrate the complex relationship between Russia and Lithuania, but to grapple with those inherently irreconcilable problems of which the Russia/Lithuania or Kovalyov/ Nose pairings are merely metaphors.

Performed by Kostas Smoriginas with a marvelous sense of naive humor owing much to Harpo Marx, the "nose" triumphantly prances about the stage, humming, squeaking, whistling and spitting water skyward in mock ejaculations (which, thanks to the excellent lighting and a solid black backdrop, form beautiful cascades that gracefully hang in the air). There is never a hint of naturalism in the sexual theme, ever performed in the lightest of farcical tones. And if Harpo served as a starting point for Smoriginas's "nose," the overall atmosphere of a Marx Brothers' film provides the basis for one rowdy café scene replete with fast-paced chases, up-endings and reversals.

Ultimately, *The Nose* is a fantasy that derives only its broadest outline from Gogol's story. Also included are themes faintly reminiscent of other Petersburg stories, excerpts from *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* and quotes from works about Gogol by Dmitry Merezhkovsky and Vasily Rozanov. This provides the basis for one of the play's sub-plots: the role of the artist in society.

The performance begins as Gogol (Remigius Vilkaitis) stands proudly, a statue high on a pedestal in the midst of a wide semi-circle of trash-bins (which, as we see later, are inhabited by socialites, somewhat as in Beckett's *End Game*). A washer-woman bustles around him, cleaning him up to keep him "presentable." When she climbs on a ladder to toss a bucket of water over his head, he pulls out an umbrella just in the nick of time to avoid being drenched. Subsequently, he is hounded continually by an elongated barber (Gediminas Girdvainis) who may represent a censor or, perhaps, "good taste": his intent is to make Gogol remain a cold statue on a pedestal. He forces Gogol to lug his pedestal-turned-trunk about on his back and repeatedly clips off the quills that grow on his hands (thereby, both "clipping his wings" of freedom and destroying his ability to write).

From time to time, Gogol breaks loose of his tormentor, seeking release in mad, confessional ravings that invariably offend the barber's—and, occasionally, the audience's—civilized sense of propriety. (During intermission, one talented Moscow set designer told me with dissatisfaction that Nekrosius had no right to "make" Gogol talk at such length about Russia resembling a bog.) In the finale, the writer is captured in an enormous straight-jacket with flowing arms, thus reviving for an instant the motif of Gogol as a bird seeking freedom in flight. Soon enough, however, the arms are wrapped tightly around him and he is returned, mute, to his pedestal.

With the exception of Gogol's philosophical ravings, language plays an insignificant role in this vividly visual production where the set and the *mises en scene* carry the burden of explication, and the simultaneous translation was nearly superfluous. Nekrosius has clearly found a unique and expressive theatrical language that is readily accessible to all. Whether or not one is prepared to hear or understand what he has to say is a different question altogether.

Whatever the case, I found nothing in *The Nose* that could cast doubt on the sincerity of Nekrosius's statements made on opening night and later carried on Soviet television. He said that he was equally as proud to be the first cultural ambassador of a free Lithuania in Moscow as he was to have the opportunity to interpret one of the greatest writers of Russian literature. "It is a heritage," he said, "for which I have an abiding love and affinity."

(Spring 1992, Slavic and East European Performance)

We Play "Crime," Young Spectator Theater

We Play "Crime" is the production's title and you can understand it as you like. Maybe it means the actors are playing only the "crime" half of Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment,* or maybe it means they are only "playing" at criminal games. In any case, director Kama Ginkas eventually lets us know what he thinks about Raskolnikov's murderous ideas: They're not worth chopped salad.

This is a production that puts the fifty spectators at the Young Spectator Theater on the hot seat along with the characters. The tiny, converted rehearsal room that serves as stage and hall is just big enough to handle the action. It is also small enough to make you feel that you and your neighbor—like Dostoevsky's notorious flies on the wall—are the only ones witnessing it.

When the frantic Raskolnikov methodically prepares to behead a fluttering, live chicken to prove a point, you don't merely understand an abstract philosophical notion, you feel it and you fear it. When he releases his victim, the tiny hall heaves a sigh of relief in unison. Later, when a murder does take place—cleverly represented by splitting open a head of cabbage with an ax—it evokes laughter in the hall. This is theater doing what it is supposed to do: appealing to our understanding through all the means available to it.

Since language obscures understanding as often as it facilitates it, Ginkas has another effective trick up his sleeve. His Raskolnikov (Marcus Grott) is performed by a Finnish Swede who speaks half his lines in Swedish. There is a good reason, then, why the inspector trying to solve the murder of a pawn-broker and her sister doesn't understand much of what the suspect has to say. What he does understand, like the audience, is what is essential.

The idea for a dual-language production arose when Ginkas staged *We Play "Crime"* in Finland, taking with him the Moscow actress Irina Yuryevich to play the prostitute Sonya (she plays the same role here). She performed in Russian amidst the Finnish actors. Grott played the lead role there as well, and his manic, introspective style was so impressive that Ginkas resolved to attempt something like a mirror-image of that staging in Moscow.

"The result," he says, "was a totally different show. The Finnish production was basically a normal story about a man who overstepped his boundaries. The Russian version, however, took on very different tones, both artistically as well as philosophically."

The shift also owes much to the actor performing the role of the police inspector. Viktor Gvozditsky is sublime as the finicky, effeminate Porfiry Petrovich who clings to Raskolnikov as tightly as his own creme-colored silk suit clings to him. He cajoles and caresses the tormented student with an odd, nervous charm, drawing him ever closer to the fire of confession.

Gvozditsky began working with Ginkas long ago, in another time and another place.

In Leningrad in the 1960s and 1970s, Ginkas was what he himself calls an "unem ployed dissident." Unable to work in established theaters, he staged plays at home. In 1979, he hooked up with Gvozditsky and they have often been together since.

With no hopes of a future in Leningrad, Ginkas relocated to Moscow in 1984 where, by the end of the decade, he became recognized as one of Russian theater's best directors. Many of his stagings have toured the world, and he is often invited to direct in Europe.

One recent trip, however, may have been sweeter than most. In mid-October, Ginkas traveled to Petersburg to attend a festival entitled "The Productions of Kama Ginkas in Leningrad."

"The word 'Leningrad,'" explains Ginkas, "remained in the title mostly because the literature was printed up long ago. But it only seems natural to me. That town has a long way to go before it can justify calling itself 'Petersburg' again."

The director clearly took pleasure in his triumphant return to the town that once had "kicked him out."

Meanwhile, encouraged by the results of his two experiments with *We Play "Crime"* Ginkas plans more dual-language productions.

"Russian and Western sources need to be mixed," he says. "Their cultures and mentalities fill each other out."

It is a natural mix for Ginkas. As he puts it, he is a "100% Jew," raised in the Russian culture with a strong affinity for the culture of his Lithuanian homeland, although he also calls himself a "typical 'Sov'."

What he is, by any standard, is a fine director. *We Play "Crime"* is witness to that.

(Moscow Guardian, October 1991)

Sovereign, Our Father, Vakhtangov Theater

In *Sovereign, Our Father,* the newest production at the Vakhtangov Theater not counting the most recent revival of *Princess Turandot,* Peter the Great considers his attitude towards Europe.

"Give us 20 or 30 years and we'll catch up with them," he says, before adding to healthy laughter on stage and in the hall: "And then we'll turn our backsides on them!"

Plays about tsars proliferated in Moscow in recent years, but this staging by Pyotr Fomenko stakes out its own niche. The portrayal of an arbitrary and, occasionally, repentant tsar is not what is new. Nor does the picture of a sensitive but spineless heir to the throne add anything unexpected. What is interesting in these days of Russia's most recent turn to the West is Fomenko's and playwright Fridrikh Gorenshtein's interpretation of Russia's first genuine infatuation with Europe.

Following Fomenko's wish to explore the play's theme "theatrically rather than philosophically," Maxim Sukhanov's bawdy Peter the Great stalks the huge stage at the

Vakhtangov with a pronounced limp, lugging his throne on his back or sporting a rough-cut bearskin coat. He hardly corresponds to the usual image of Russia's first "European" tsar. Furthermore, the court intrigues, conspiracies and the ruthless manner of quashing them are clearly throwbacks to the medieval Russia of Ivan the Terrible and not harbingers of a modern civilization.

The Christian church, perhaps western society's most prominent manifestation in the production (aside from mannequins dressed in European style and a few other props pushed symbolically to the extreme edges of the stage), is no less atavistic. Priests both encourage assassinating the "anti-Christ" tsar and absolve him of sin when he executes his impetuous son Alexei (performed busily but sincerely by Sergei Makovetsky).

A few select moments clearly, if predictably, indicate that the debunking of the myth of Peter's European principles is not only intended in a historical sense. The first comes immediately in a Taganka Theater-inspired opening where a motley band of jesters stares into the audience calling for reactions from the "people" who, naturally, do not respond. Another comes at performance's end as a "common citizen" plies the troubled tsar with pressing questions. Among them: "Tell us sovereign, our father, where do we obtain oats?"

With its cast of 40 and its frequent changes in place of action, the acting and the multi-layered plot do not always hold one's attention. Indeed, there are times when this three and a half hour marathon seems as long and confusing as Russian history itself.

But, *Sovereign, Our Father* is a grand visual spectacle on a Russian scale. Maria Danilova's expansive set, Pavel Kaplevich's costumes and Fomenko's use of every inch of the stage from the proscenium to the rafters, are a feast for the eyes.

Hanging from the ceiling are several enormous wood tables high above which hang something resembling white cloth stars. From time to time they drop earthward gracefully to form bed linens or, as in the finale, to suggest, perhaps, the souls of executed prisoners and imply the pagan, rather than the Christian, roots of the Russian culture. The dangling tables dance in the air as actors move about them, creating a captivating vision of a world trapped between heaven and earth.

Playwright Gorenshtein has had plenty of opportunity to contemplate the peculiarities of the Russian condition, both as an unpublished Moscow writer who participated in the publication of the scandalous almanac *Metropole* in 1979, and as an emigrant living in Germany since 1980. Director Fomenko himself is no stranger to the Russian enigma. He first made a name for himself in the 1960s, working on several controversial productions at the Taganka Theater.

Said Fomenko, "I long wanted to stage a dramatization of Dmitry Merezhkovsky's novel *Peter and Alexei*. But when I came upon Gorenshtein's play *Infanticide,* I saw that this gave me a more modern source to work with."

Gorenshtein's bulky play, he noted, was written more to be read than staged, and he had to make large cuts in it, while adding snippets from other works of Russian literature to facilitate transitions.

"My main task was to explore the relationship between culture and civilization in Russia," the director said, pointing out that this dichotomy is largely a battle between Russian and European influences.

"The paradoxes and disharmonies of this mix are especially obvious now," he concluded.

Sovereign, Our Father may not be for everyone. But it is an intriguing look at the sources of a culture which prompted Rudyard Kipling to observe acidly, "the Russian is a delightful person till he tucks in his shirt."

(Moscow Guardian, December 1991)

From the Life of Rain Worms and *Women's Games,* Chekhov Art Theater

For many years, the Moscow Art Theater has occupied an odd place in this city of great theaters. On one hand, it maintains the reputation of being the house that Stanislavsky built, Stalin's favorite theater, and the "showcase of the Soviet regime." On the other, it is often the butt of jokes and the most common example of the crisis that, not always justly, many feel has stricken Russian theater.

A few years ago, the theater broke in two. One half, now called the "New" or the Gorky Art Theater, moved to Tverskoi Boulevard. The other half remained in the stylish art nouveau building on Art Theater Lane and is now called the "Old" or the Chekhov Art Theater.

At least the "older" member of the family is showing new signs of life. The recent developments are connected, in part, with the return to the theater of one of its, and the country's, best actresses.

After an absence of several years, Yekaterina Vasilyeva again is working her magic at the Chekhov Art Theater in two new plays, the enigmatically titled *From the Life of Rain Worms,* by the Swede Per Olov Enquist and *Women's Games* by the Poles Krzysztof Zanussi and Edward Zebrowski.

From the Life of Rain Worms is an introspective look at a meeting between Hans Christian Andersen (performed with exquisite psychological exactness by Stanislav Lyubshin) and Johanna Heberg, a famous Danish actress (played by Vasilyeva).

This Andersen is less the celebrated author of fairy tales than he is a frustrated, second rate playwright who has come to the great actress for advice on how to realize his dream of writing a great play. However, as the action inexorably progresses, it is Heberg who comes to rely on the spiritual strength of the "lowly author of children's stories."

Both are of modest, even poor, heritage. But whereas the writer has remained a simple man, even if against his will, the actress has violated her own nature in order to overcome her past and achieve respect. Their marathon meeting is an unexpected revelation for both.

Vasilyeva's Heberg is a suppressed volcano of complexes, anger and lyricism. She does little but sit at her desk, the piano or stand by the window, but one is gripped by her internal drama, which she allows to break surface only rarely. She suppresses within all the tension of her character, transferring to the hall her troubled spiritual aura solely by secondary means of communication, as only an actress of her talent can.

The production, with an elegant set by Boris Messerer, is deceptively quiet and lacking in external action. That is represented by Roza Sirota's captivating performance of the Bald Woman, Heberg's mother-in-law. Excepting some incomprehensible muttering and a few shifts in her chair, she sleeps through the entire performance at center stage.

Director Mikhail Kochetkov noted that he consciously strove for understatement.

"The styles of intrusive directors and political theater have exhausted themselves," says the 35 year-old director. "The time has come for us to deal with affairs of the spirit."

His staging of *From the Life of Rain Worms* is subtle, but powerful, proof that he achieved what he was after.

Women's Games, staged by co-author Krzysztof Zanussi, is a combination of two superficially simple one-act plays. The first, and weakest, tells the story of an aging film actress who outwits a resourceful intruder on her privacy. The second portrays a humorous and uneven game of wits between a bed-ridden French marquise and a young girl hired to sit with her.

Zanussi's direction, like the plays, is transparent and unanalytical. At times, as in the first act, it descends into flatness, although never as a fault of Vasilyeva's performances in the two lead roles.

Glamorous and inaccessible in the first act, Vasilyeva is shrewd and even playfully sadistic in the second as she masterfully befuddles her hapless helper (performed with warmth by Yevgenia Dobrovolskaya). From her static position in the center of a bed in pink sheets, Vasilyeva reigns over her house, France, the world and the stage at the Art Theater.

Comparing a theater's past and present is a dubious undertaking. Still, these new productions at the Chekhov Art Theater hint at the power that once made the venue one of the world's most famous.

(Moscow Guardian, January 1992)

***Salomé,* Alla Sigalova Independent Company**

Since its inception in 1989, Alla Sigalova's Independent Company has both offended and delighted audiences with its visually tantalizing dance productions. What some have called pornography, others have taken to their hearts as a celebration of the mystery of human intimacy.

Sigalova herself is a bit baffled by the reactions.

"I am always amazed when people say, 'Oh, how erotic!' I have no desire to create erotic shows and I don't see my work in that light," she says. "For some reason, people constantly try to divide the human experience into elements of spirit and flesh. For me, these things are absolutely indivisible."

Indeed, *A Game of Hide and Seek with Loneliness* is a liberating fantasia in which people search for themselves, sometimes in the reflection of others, sometimes in isolation. From time to time, they are surprised to find what they are looking for already locked in their embraces, but just as often, they don't. And as the episodic scenes progress, it becomes clear that meaning is to be found in the game itself and not in its outcome.

Like all of Sigalova's stagings, *A Game of Hide and Seek* is seldom about sex, although it is charged throughout with sexuality.

Anna Terekhova and Andrei Sergievsky in the Alla Sigalova Independent Company's production of *Salomé,* based on Oscar Wilde, 1992. Photo: Sergei Petrukhin

The company's new production of *Salomé* continues Sigalova's flirtations with the spirit and the flesh. And, as in her earlier staging of *Othello,* she provides in it a free-form mix of dance and traditional drama. Oscar Wilde's sparsely-used text, here, is little more than a pretext for a basic plot on which Sigalova superimposes the theme of Vladimir Nabokov's novel, *Lolita*. As such, the focus is shifted from Salomé's seduction of Iokanaan to Humbert Humbert's unrealizable love for Lolita.

There is little attempt to merge the two stories by means of external signs. Iokanaan (Sergei Shvydky) and Salomé (played by Sigalova's young daughter, Anna Politkovskaya) are outfitted in modern dress and speak their rare lines "realistically." Herod, his wife and their attendants, on the other hand, sport macabre grease-paint masks, black lips and black clothes, and on the rare occasion that they speak, they do so in tense, chanting tones.

But if the characters are divided by their appearance, they are united by the bold movements of Sigalova's expressive choreography. With their sweeping arms and legs and their tense, fanned fingers (which the director calls the "primary conduits of human energy"), the characters seem to be involved in an attempt to master the physical space in which they exist. This is not a "decadent" story of seduction and revenge, but a story of differing individuals seeking to justify their own place in the world.

The centerpiece is the duet of Herod and his wife during which Herod (Andrei Sergievsky) ultimately achieves his demand of seeing Salomé dance. Their tension-packed conversation unfolds slowly as they make love mechanically, but sensually, on the floor. They separate, come together, and separate again. Their terse speech and harsh expressions, adding a second mask to their faces, make it clear that communication between them is being conducted on another plane altogether. Anna Terekhova as Herod's sorceress-like wife is a knot of unearthly strength, power and coercion, but it is not enough. Her weaker, more frivolous husband prevails.

The dance of the seven veils is performed by everyone but Salomé. Echoing the duet of Herod and his wife, the characters occasionally fall into short bursts of unified motion, but, just as quickly, fall apart again, each dancing his own inner vision.

Ultimately, Iokanaan's love is doomed, for it does not have access to the dark mysteries commanded by Herod and his wife. The indifferent Salomé serves up Iokanaan's head in the form of a child's ball that bounces innocently and gaily across the stage.

This brief interpretation of *Salomé* occasionally has the feel of an etude that needs to be filled out in order to bind its parts together. But therein lies its formidable strength as well, for the performance is marked by a striking sense of space and inner freedom. It does not so much illustrate a narrative as it does suggest the feeling and the look of intense emotional states. What is important is not the intentionally vague plot, but the intuitive associations that are bound to arise in the mind of the beholder.

Salomé is a rare and beautiful spectacle whose impression stays with you and continues to grow long after you have left the theater.

(Moscow Guardian, January 1992)

I Tap About Moscow, **Bat Cabaret**

How many theaters in Moscow can boast that their shows *begin* with stormy applause from the audience as the curtain parts?

Of those, how many can make jokes about Anton Chekhov dying from tuberculosis, the consequences of the Doctor's Conspiracy, and KGB recruitment of school boys and do it in a way that elicits warmth, understanding and genuine humor?

And of those, how many can bring on stage a pudgy, somewhat eccentric Vladimir Lenin who wins the spectators' hearts with a sighing glance at a life-size photo of Marilyn Monroe?

Chances are, there is only one. At any rate, you can see all of this and more at the one and only Bat cabaret, located in the heart of Moscow just off Pushkin Square. The theater's newest show is called/*Tap About Moscow* and its author is Grigory Gurvich, the cabaret's artistic director.

Not counting a 69-year hiatus (1920 to 1989), this is the same Bat that gained worldwide fame in Moscow before the revolution and then continued its star-bound trajectory in Paris and New York for many years thereafter. Not only do the shows take place in the very same theater whose walls still emanate the spirit of a glorious past, but, in a contemporary context, naturally, they recreate the intellectual lightheartedness and

sophisticated spoofery that made Russian culture the most attractive and influential of all world cultures in the first two decades of the 20th century.

"I build my shows on three principles," Gurvich said recently a half hour before show time, "nostalgia, sentimentalism and musicality."

But don't be fooled. There is nothing weepy in his nostalgia and nothing maudlin in his sentimentality. As for music, there is plenty of it from beginning to end. And in the best tradition of Russian cosmopolitanism, it includes French torch songs, Italian arias, American jazz and English rock. The result is a purely Russian show.

According to its author, *I Tap About Moscow* is a vaguely autobiographical look at life in the Soviet Union from the second World War to modern times. But the atmosphere of the production and the theater alike go much deeper into the past.

Like the Bat's first performance, *The Reading of a New Play,* it is broken into episodes in which each actor plays various characters. Natalya Trikhleb bounds back and forth marvelously among roles including a lovesick girl, an elegant opera singer (what a voice!) and Catherine the Great. Alexander Razalin is, among other things, a warm and rumpled alter ego for the play's author and Inna Ageeva transforms instantaneously from a kind of comic nerd into a French siren.

It all begins as Gurvich himself briefly reminisces about the past under the pretext of responding to a letter from an old friend now living in Detroit. The epistolary structure is what binds together the loosely-connected scenes.

Men lazily play backgammon in an Asian republic during the war, arguing about women and war; school children daydream during ballet class; fantastically wealthy émigrés return to their poverty-stricken home towns; old girlfriends reminisce about a common lover; and a host of celebrities from Hitler to John Lennon gather for a wacky impersonator's contest.

One of the most uproarious scenes portrays the first meeting of a new coalition government chaired by the "first governor ever elected by the people." It doesn't take but two or three words for the new "democrats" to revert to a style of behavior that is much more ingrained in Russian politics than democracy.

Almost everybody tap dances their way through this occasionally wistful, occasionally rollicking tour of Russian life.

"I can't say all my actors are great tap-dancers," comments Gurvich, "but without real training, without a tradition and without the necessary means to give them either of those, I think they do damn well."

Tap-dancing, for Gurvich, is something of a symbol for the Russian intelligentsia's relationship to western culture. Sophisticated Russians have always not only loved western art forms. They have also always been able to assimilate them and create something new on their basis.

"It may be naive," the author/director continues, "but what we are attempting to show on our small stage is that everything a citizen of this country loves can be had right here. You don't have to leave to realize your dreams."

Who would know better than Gurvich? By resurrecting the historic Bat, he is proving his hypothesis by example.

(Moscow Guardian, January 1992)

Bald/Brunet, Stanislavsky Drama Theater

Artists often get accused by contemporaries of creating nonsense, while later generations often see revelations in their works. Occasionally, the lag in time between confusion and understanding is foreshortened. That usually happens in periods of major social upheaval when different contemporary generations harbor different expectations.

There could hardly be more fertile grounds for such a classic generation gap than Russia in 1992. And one would be hard-pressed to find a better example of this process at work than the new production of *Bald/Brunet* at the Stanislavsky Theater.

Written by twenty-two year-old Daniil Gink and staged by twenty-five year-old Oleg Babitsky, *Bald/Brunet* stars Pyotr Mamonov, one of the youth idols from the preceding generation. Mamonov, until recently, was the leader of the popular rock group Zvuki Mu.

Their collaboration may be something of a enigma for older generations, but the packed houses of young people haven't the slightest problem understanding this production's language. And there is a good reason for it. This is one of the most exhilarating, challenging pieces of theater playing in Moscow.

As often happens in good theater, the performance that the spectator sees differs from the original idea. Gink noted that his idea was quite simple.

"There is a man," he explained, "who interacts with another man who turns out not to exist. I wrote a play about how a strange man lived alone and had dreams that constantly draw him closer to childhood. He grew old, met a woman and then something happened with him. The performance itself is about something else, although I like it very much because it is independent of me while being a part of me at the same time."

What the performance is about is freedom and transcendence, freedom of spirit, freedom from clichés and transcendence of physical limits. On the surface, Mamonov's eccentric Bald Man may appear to be something of an emotional paralytic. But appearances can be deceiving. In fact, Mamonov plays a beautiful soul struggling to free himself of his earthly body. Echoing Mark Polyakov's bewitching, almost florescent set, Mamonov reveals his character's illuminated state from within.

"This theme exists in my play," Gink continued, "but it was heightened by Mamonov." The playwright then revealed the degree to which generation gaps are at work even among the collaborators on the staging. "After all," he said, "Mamonov has more internal and external limits than I do."

The charismatic Mamonov is a master at finding limits, depicting them physically and breaking through them. His conversations with the enigmatic Woman (Lyudmila Lushina) compel him into a frantic search for a way out of his awkwardness. A few of the play's most revelatory moments come as Mamonov joins with Denis Burgazliev's Brunet in wordless interludes. Freed of language, the duo—which may be merely two elements of a single psyche—interact solely through facial expressions and contorted body movements. They are accompanied by thundering music composed, in part, by Mamonov himself.

For those who are put off by the commonly low level of Russian rock music and by the clumsy manner in which it is usually incorporated into film and stage works, *Bald/Brunet* will be a major surprise. The sparing use of strong rock music is always woven organically into the development of the action.

But more surprising yet is not that the youthful audience responds well to its "own" music or that it worships every move of its rock idol-turned-actor. What is most noteworthy is the way a generation unaccustomed to seeking expression or meaning in theatrical works understands and responds to *Bald/Brunet*. Gink, Babitsky and Mamonov speak a common language with a new generation that is as open and lacking in complexes as they are.

Says Gink, "I am thankful to Mamonov for bringing that kind of spectator into the theater. At times the hall can be a bit uncouth, but it is always alive, theatrical and youthful."

The audience, in this case, reflects brilliantly the spirit of the performance.

(Moscow Guardian, February 1992)

***Triumphal Square,* Theater u Nikitskikh vorot**

Any great city is in part a collection of shadows and spirits. And the cataclysmic twentieth century probably filled Moscow with more shadows and spirits than any other city. Untold numbers of buildings, streets and people disappeared before their time, leaving behind them powerful traces.

Take, for example, Mayakovsky Square which was once called Triumphal Square. Perched there on the corner is the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall which once housed one of the great theaters of the world, the Vsevolod Meyerhold Theater. The extravagant facade is long gone, and the building was long ago reshaped. But even without plaques or memorials, Meyerhold's spirit still hovers there.

Triumphal Square is also the title of a new production at the Theater u Nikitskikh vorot. Written and directed by Mark Rozovsky, it is a memorial to the director who revolutionized modern theater. Meyerhold's actors called him simply Master, and they didn't stop even after he was shot to death by the secret police in 1940. Rozovsky dares not refer to him differently and it is as the Master that Meyerhold takes center stage in *Triumphal Square*.

Rozovsky was intrigued by the fate of an artist who got mixed up in politics. One of Meyerhold's first theatrical loves was the commedia dell'arte, and Rozovsky surrounds the master with a cast of gay Harlequins, Pierrots and Columbines. Later, Meyerhold would become the director at the tsar's Imperial Theater and, after the revolution, he quickly became the standard-bearer for a new communist art.

Triumphal Square asks, "Who was Meyerhold?" And it gives an answer: He was an artist.

The answer, however, is as complex as the man himself. During the civil war, his communist ties nearly caused him to be shot by the White Army while his former position at the Imperial Theater saved him. During the purges, his friendships with Bukharin and Trotsky caused him to be shot by the NKVD. Meyerhold was an iconoclast and a rebel. That, suggests Rozovsky, mixed with the times in which he lived, made his end inevitable.

Sergei Desnitsky as Vsevolod Meyerhold in Mark Rozovsky's production of *Triumphal Square* Theater u Nikitskikh vorot, 1992. Photo: Theater u Nikitskikh vorot