kultura

NOVEMBER 11/2006

Russian Theatre Between Tradition and Revival

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kultura. Russian cultural review is published under the supervision of
Professor Wolfgang Eichwede,
director of the Research Centre for East European Studies at Bremen University.
Editorial board: Hartmute Trepper M.A., Dr. Isabelle de Keghel (until June 2006), Guest Editors
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editorial

Theatre is the liveliest and the most fleeting of the arts. What should we expect from it? Should it depict present-day conflicts or timeless ones? And in what form? Should it provide an unfiltered mirror image of the violence of our time, leaving viewers depressed? Or can theatre become a space of longing, a space of reflection, without glossing over the negative sides of life? In Russian theatre, it often does. Moscow director Genrietta Yanovskaya once said: 'No matter how gloomy and tragic the events portrayed on stage, at least once in a performance the heavens should open wide.'

Russian theatre is based on the belief that ethics and aesthetics rank equally. To this day, both teachers and viewers expect actors to follow this rule. Continuing the tradition of ancient drama, an ethical demand for catharsis has been firmly established in Russian theatre since Konstantin Stanislavsky. The audience is expected to empathise with the characters on stage, live through the events portrayed, and thereby undergo purification. Russian viewers want to recognise themselves in the protagonists, to suffer, love, hope and laugh with them. They do not usually want to see the destructive effects of society depicted in pure form. The artistic merits of a play are judged by the extent to which the director and author have succeeded in turning an everyday problem into a philosophical, existential question, and started a lively dialogue with their audience. These criteria are especially important in Saint Petersburg, a city where tradition has always been cherished and postmodernism is less welcome than in Moscow. For the same reason, Saint Petersburg theatre is constantly threatened with stagnation.

In Russia, theatre has always played an important role: as a space of free expression in times of political repression, as a place of historical education and, in the best productions, as a place of serious artistic statements or humorous entertainment. Or both. In *The Lower Depths*, Saint Petersburg director Lev Ehrenburg explores the boundaries of humanity in a grotesque combination of the lofty and the lowly, of naturalist psychology and popular buffoonery, creating a paradoxical, up-to-date portrayal of simple folk in their powerlessness, their capacity for tender love and their vulnerability. A vertical gaze: under the skin of things and into the skies above.

Lev Dodin's Maly Theatre in Saint Petersburg is one of only two Russian theatres to have been accepted into the respected *Union des Théâtres de l'Europe*, along with Anatoly Vassiliev's School of Dramatic Art in Moscow. Aesthetically speaking, the two could not be more different: Vassiliev advocates a stylised and ritualised type of theatre, whereas Dodin's large-scale, epic productions continue the tradition of psychological realism, although in recent years they have been permeated with a gloomy worldview.

Since perestroika, there have been no formal impediments to artistic freedom in Russia. Theatres big or small are free to choose their own style, and each has its own constituency. Nevertheless, the Holiness of Russian theatre is threatened from within—by sensationalism and cheap imitations of Western fashions—and without—by Russia's early capitalist society, which increasingly subjects art to a utilitarian logic, once again depriving it of its freedom to experiment.

ABOUT THE GUEST EDITOR:

Ruth Wyneken is a freelance dramaturge, drama teacher, journalist and translator. She specialises in the theory and practice of Russian theatre, and particularly in dramatic analysis based on the late Stanislavsky. She has taught in Zurich, Hamburg, Ulm, Berlin (Free University), Saint Petersburg and Moscow (GITIS). She lives in Saint Petersburg and Berlin.

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Russia's Opening to the West and Russian Holy Theatre

Ruth Wyneken

A good hundred years ago, Konstantin Stanislavsky and his disciples initiated what has become known as living, Holy Theatre. In the Soviet Union, their tradition was distorted and put into an ideological straightjacket. Nevertheless, theatres continued to play an important social role as places of relatively free speech and silent resistance. With the fall of communism and Russia's opening to the West, drama lost that function. Theatre now had to redefine itself and fall back upon its core values. After a spell of euphoria about the West, contacts are now patchy and unsystematic.

Act I: Dogma and Resistance

In the spring of 1984, Taganka Square in Moscow was thronging with people and congested traffic. Anyone coming out of the Metro would immediately be asked if they had a spare ticket. Once again, the Taganka Theatre was playing Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, directed by Yury Lyubimov. Hell would break loose every time at the Taganka and beyond, for the devil was out to make a clean sweep of atheism, lies, corruption, avarice, and an inhumane bureaucracy all across Moscow. This production of Bulgakov's novel was as political as could be; that it passed the censor before the premiere in 1978 was a small miracle. Whoever managed to get hold of a ticket for one of the rare performances could count themselves lucky. Spellbound, viewers would hang on the actors' every word, careful not to miss any detail, no matter how minute, any gesture or pause. At the end of each performance, the actors were rewarded with thundering applause.

In the 1970s and 80s, directors who cast off the straightjacket of officially imposed socialist realism (proclaimed the only acceptable aesthetic doctrine in 1934) drew full auditoriums in Moscow and Leningrad. Viewers flocked to the theatres whenever, instead of featuring 'party meetings leading the way to the bright future' (metaphorically speaking), they portrayed actual human lives, as embodied by the broken, tragic heroes of classic literature or shown in modern plays that cautiously conveyed critical perspectives on reality. The great directors of the time were masters of subtle suggestions, veiled irony, special intonation and skilfully disguised resistance. Viewers were grateful for every breath of fresh air, every morsel of food for the mind, for in those times parody, satire and political jokes had been almost entirely forced underground.

Yet there were others too: conformist theatres that obediently staged musty classics in florid sets and costumes and, inevitably, the odd Soviet didactic play; theatres with life-tenured actors, a bloated administration, and a single style: Konstantin Stanislavsky's psychological theatre as seen through a Soviet lens.

They had forgotten that Stanislavsky, the great early 20th century reformer and artist, the founder of Russian Holy Theatre, had been constantly engaged in an unfettered search for living expressions of the human spirit, for sources of spiritual and psychological energy that actors might tap into, for vivid drama embedded in its own time – rather than ideological dogma. The early Soviet avant-garde was officially passed over in silence: pioneers such as Vsevolod Meyerhold, Yevgeny Vakhtangov, Alexander Tairov or Mikhail Chekhov – all of them disciples of Stanislavsky's – had each in his own distinctive way advocated an artistic elevation of reality and created a new world on stage; yet no publications on them could appear in the Soviet Union. The theatre academies taught a distorted, simplified and 'arithmetic' version of the System, declared a sacrosanct standard, although in fact it misrepresented the

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original Stanislavsky.

Western modernist authors (Beckett, Genet, Ionesco) and Russian absurdist writers (Daniil Kharms or Alexander Vvedensky) were indexed; even after the fall of the Iron Curtain teachers hesitated to include them in curricula. Their students, however, hungered for information about these authors: classes were packed even when they were deliberately scheduled early in the morning.

Yet throughout the Soviet period there were individual teachers who secretly taught the methods of the forbidden reformers, salvaging the valuable heritage of Holy Theatre from oblivion and passing it on to their students.

Act II: A New Dawn

As late as the mid-1980s, plays such as Sławomir Mrożek's *The Emigrants* or Lyudmila Petrushevskaya's *Cinzano*, a modern tale of alcohol and self-destruction, could only be staged in underground venues. But more and more directors were assailing the dogmas and prohibitions of 'socialist theatre'. While others were opening up politics, these directors were opening minds by introducing new perspectives, new topics and critical approaches to drama, and made a significant contribution to the changes taking place at the time.

As early as 1987, there was a sense of a new era dawning on Moscow's theatre scene. A Union of Theatre Workers was founded, immediately initiating an extensive reform, dubbed 'the experiment', with over seventy participating theatres in eight union republics. They strove to make theatres independent from the state, both economically and in their choice of topics. The Union provided moral and economic support to budding theatre professionals, and soon began to organise one theatre festival after another, featuring the most interesting productions from across the Soviet republics.

Alexander Dzekun from Saratov on the Volga took some of his daring productions to Moscow, including *Fourteen Little Red Huts* by the outlawed Andrei Platonov and Bulgakov's *The Purple Island*, ominously ending with a scene where the censor rises from the grave; the performances were followed by open and candid debates. The festivals also attracted directors of great talent from the non-Russian republics: Robert Sturua from Georgia, Eimuntas Nekrošius from Lithuania, and Adolf Shapiro from Latvia.

In the summer of 1989, Yury Lyubimov returned from political exile to the Taganka Theatre, enthusiastically observing that there was a huge thirst for things spiritual in the Soviet Union. By that time, hundreds of drama studios had sprung up in Moscow and Leningrad, experimenting with new topics, forms and aesthetics, although censorship was only officially abolished in 1990. Formerly proscribed authors such as Mikhail Bulgakov, Boris Pasternak, Nikolai Erdman or Isaak Babel finally hit the stage: the intelligentsia was discovering the blank spots on its cultural map and set about catching up.

Whereas in Moscow, new studios were mainly founded by theatre professionals, in Leningrad they were usually created by actors or amateurs. Soon the small and large stages began to host political education shows in the spirit of glasnost and perestroika – the catchwords of the time – followed by a wave of hastily organised guest performances that met with a triumphant reception in the West.

'To the West, to the West' was the rallying cry. The Iron Curtain had finally fallen, and Russian theatres were touring the entire world. They were met with enthusiasm – and suffered cultural shocks. Igor Ivanov, one of the stars of Lev Dodin's Maly Dramatichesky Teatr (MDT) in Saint Petersburg, later remembered: 'It was a terrible

period when we went abroad for the first time, in 1989. There were shiny shop windows, an affluent life. We were simply shocked. For some it was a tragedy. For ten years we kept touring and touring, it was exhausting. But the most important thing didn't happen: there was no dialogue. At first there was interpretation, the viewers had headsets; that was good. Then the issue of money became paramount, interpretation was too expensive, there were surtitles. What dialogue can there be when they do that? As an actor, you are faced with a black hole, you get no reaction or echo. That's terrible.'

Act III: Conflicts and Aberrations

In the wake of the social upheaval, the role of Russian theatre changed fundamentally. The boom of highly topical plays was detrimental to the exercise of drama's true function, and by consequence political events, revelations about history and media sensations gradually came to outstrip the theatres in terms of popularity. Concurrently, economic disasters set in; perestroika was popularly dubbed 'katastroika', and in the early 1990s, weary urbanites turned their backs on the stage: no Lenin or Stalin, no poet or thinker could attract them to the theatres any longer. Now that all of a sudden everything could be said, people pessimistically concluded that 'Nobody needs artists anymore.'

Nor was it easy to fall back upon art. Some directors did try to reform acting training; they turned to the old masters of Holy Theatre, whose writings had by then been published in Russia, and studied the genuine version of Stanislavski's teachings on ethics and aesthetics. They elaborated methods of improvisation, shutting themselves off from the crises and upheaval all around, as Anatoly Vasiliev did in the laboratory of his School of Dramatic Art. Yet they all depended on touring Western countries for their existence. Actors could no longer survive on a regular salary, and many of them left their profession. Lack of ideas, economic plight and blatant dilettantism spelled death for most experimental studios in Saint Petersburg. Few resisted the pressures, and many had to steer a new artistic course. Having staged numerous national premieres of Western and Russian plays over twenty years, Dzekun was forced to shut down his theatre in Saratov. Others emigrated.

Theatre's enthusiastically welcomed liberation from the state revealed problems of a new kind. One of them was internal censorship. The old dogma of conservative, orthodox theatre was still strong among educators, scholars and critics. Thus, in late 1994, at a nationwide festival entitled *New Drama* in Smolensk, where the young author Alexander Zhelestsov presented his play *Crazy Russian Meditation*, noted critics subjected him to a 'bloodless execution', whose ideological, sermonising and malicious tone harked back to Soviet times. It was very difficult to have contemporary plays included in repertoires, especially outside Moscow and Saint Petersburg; they were considered trash theatre, an absolute taboo. Zhelestsov had used juicy street slang and made fun of contemporary Russian realities. The play had its shortcomings, but it was fresh and experimental. A young critic who had supported him the night before gave in and added her trembling voice to the chorus of denouncement. She later admitted that everyone still had a censor sitting at the back of their heads.

Nor did directors always react democratically. Thus, around the same time, Lev Dodin, the director of the MDT in Saint Petersburg, banned writers from the Petersburg Theatre Journal (PTJ) from the premises for having openly criticised him and accused him of betraying human and artistic values. The intelligentsia was very quick to take offence when, instead of highlight-

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ing faith, love and hope, he used drastic means to demonstrate that the whole country was literally drowning in excrement (see the portrait of Dodin in this issue of *kultura*). From then on PTJ critics had to disguise themselves in order to buy tickets. Dodin's students at the Academy are also said to have demonstratively burned several copies of the journal in class. Society was changing more quickly than viewers' and critics' mental habits or educators' attitudes…

But capitalism generated yet another tendency that subjected Russian drama to even greater tensions: commercialisation and an ensuing loss of quality. Many a theatre drew crowds with vulgarity, superficial imitation of the West or sensational breaches of taboo, hoping to make easy money. And yet the traditions of Russian Holy Theatre – long rehearsal periods and a careful and systematic study and analysis of the play on stage, enabling the actors to enter their roles 'body and soul' – are as precious as ever.

Act IV: Contacts with the West

Over the past years, the theatre scene in Russia, and especially in Moscow, has opened to the West, hosting international festivals, new plays, spectacular guest performances and establishing new venues, including basement theatres that often present shocking content in a provocative form. Thus *Teatr.doc* uses unprocessed documentary material and faithful reflections of everyday life in the style of hardcore British documentary drama. This has a liberating effect that attracts young viewers. Whether it is art is a question everyone has to decide for themselves.

By contrast, Moscow's GITIS, Russia's oldest and most renowned theatre academy, is the main stronghold of tradition. Most of its professors still consider 'holy psychological theatre' the only acceptable method of dramatic art. While this has indeed influenced drama all over the world and offers a great foundation for acting, without taking in fresh influences it risks ossification.

Bluebeard *at GITIS, The Virgin's Monologue, Yulia Peresild and Roman Shalyapin (Photo: Ruth Wyneken)*

GITIS has no experience with contemporary Western plays. As late as 1998, Stefan Schmidtke, a young Moscow-trained director, could not get the German author Dea Loher's *Tattoo* accepted there. Having a play about incest staged in this theatre, for these students, was unthinkable.

Only in the spring of 2006 did Professor Oleg Kudryashov succeed in obtaining permission for me to work in his studio to stage the first contemporary German play to be produced at GITIS. This was made possible by the German Academic Ex-

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change Service, which granted me a short-term dramaturgy fellowship, and the Goethe Institute in Moscow. With Kudryashov's final-year acting and directing class, we staged Dea Loher's *Blue-beard – Hope of Women*, gently linking it with the traditional Russian approach. It was an experiment in merging a traditional psychological acting method with a European detached style, including German songs presented with Brechtian estrangement; a practical and aesthetic rapprochement with West European theatre.

In the course of working on the play, students learned many new skills: above all ease and detachment in acting, rapid metamorphosis on stage, and a new type of interaction with the audience. It was a challenging task for the students, but they were enthusiastic: Russian actors certainly have no lack of bodily expressiveness, temperament and emotiveness. Time will show whether this project will have laid the foundations for lasting cooperation with GITIS.

Epilogue

Contemporary Russian theatre features great diversity, offering something to suit every taste. Most recently, however, the growth of subtle political pressure and the predominance of utilitarian thinking have been endangering this variety: if an artist becomes a nuisance, he or she may be deprived of subsidies or premises, especially if they are located in central Moscow, where property prices have soared to shocking heights. This is currently happening to Anatoly Vasiliev's School of Dramatic Art: there are plans to liquidate this unique laboratory using a flimsy pretext. Loyal colleagues are vehemently protesting against the devious actions of Moscow City's Culture Committee, while others are purportedly ready to rush into the struggle for his attractive building. One critic wrote an article protesting against the plans which she laconically entitled 'CPSU light'. But that story is stuff for a different drama.

Translated from the German
by Mischa Gabowitsch

Reading Suggestions:

- Anatoly Smeliansky, The Russian Theatre after Stalin, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999
- Robert Leach, Victor Borovsky, A History of Russian Theatre, Cambridge; NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999
- Jurij Alschitz, 40 questions of one role: a method for the actor's self-preparation, Berlin: AKT-ZENT, 2005; The Vertical of the Role, Berlin: AKT-ZENT, 2003

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review

Light in the Lower Depths – an Artistic Dissection...

Nikolay Pessochinsky

...of the spirit and soul of Russian Man in Lev Ehrenburg's exciting production of Gorky's world-famous play The Lower Depths *at the Lensoviet's studio theatre in Saint Petersburg.*

Lev Ehrenburg's production of Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths* breaks through the protective boundary of the purely artistic; it goes beyond the usual measure of artistic convention in depicting the raw realities of life. In his work, Gorky painted a picture of social misery; in Soviet times, by consequence, it was usually staged as a social drama about outcasts, those who have sunk 'to the lower depths', although it may also be read as a philosophical drama about human dignity and humanism. Ehrenburg (born in 1953) and his actors show us a different condition of human suffering, the physical or physiological one: the crisis of human nature. One of the characters in the play, Vaska Pepel, says: 'I live as though I were sinking in the grave.' The atmosphere of Ehrenburg's play expresses that state through concrete corporeality. Being both a director and a doctor by training, Ehrenburg has a feeling for the degree of naturalistic brutality that contemporary viewers can absorb.

The actors of the NeBDT[1] are all young, and their training enables them to convey the life of the body in all its naturalness, richness and activity. They have a stage presence that is convincing from both a documentary and a psychological point of view; nevertheless, because they are young, charming and full of energy, the performance never becomes disgusting: its corporeality is communicated through the tone of their acting. The entire play is made up of practical jokes, tricks and *lazzi* of the commedia dell'arte. When the Baron sneezes, dispersing the narcotic powder, he starts snatching and snapping at it. When the cap on drunk Satin's head flares up, he does not even notice it. When the scruffy Actor attempts a verbal and dancing routine, he only manages parody. When the dazed peasants drag Anna's dead body over the stage, they plop it noisily on the floor, tumble and pass out on the corpse, dead drunk. When Vaska and Luka run to tell Kleshch about the death of his wife, they both flop into a trough with a great splash. An eerie little vaudeville....

Shining through Gorky's story is the chorus of Dostoyevsky's characters: weak-willed and lost people, conscious of their sins, wistfully remembering human dignity. Gorky never wanted to resemble Dostoyevsky in any way, and yet, in the profoundest motifs of his work, he did. Theatre grants every human being, be they poor in spirit or insulted and humiliated, a glimpse of the sky. Shaky and stuttering, every character says their prayer for salvation. The transition from darkness and shamelessness to confession is abrupt and stark. Anna, for example, finds the road to salvation (to Jerusalem, a city whose name she has forgotten) in her own wretched way after her husband catches her and Luka bestially, instinctively and insensibly giving in to their lust.

In the lower depths of psychology, Lev Ehrenburg and his troupe are looking for something very different than on the vulgar and pathetic surface. The life of the human spirit appears as a kind of blend between a biblical narrative and the ravings of a mentally retarded drunkard. The path is shrouded in darkness; it leads to where Man is saved not because of his earthly life, but in spite of it. Indeed they *demand* that forgiveness; the future must come *in spite of* the present. The road leads from oneself and into the unknown.

What is behind the criminal conduct of the charismatic Luka? What is behind the lofty pose of the Actor, the only one to recognise that hope

[1] Not-Too-Big Drama Theatre (NeBolshoy Dramatichesky Teatr, NeBDT: a pun on the Bolshoy [literally 'big'] Drama Theatre).

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cannot enthral us for long, and throws himself into the well? Is it that aphoristic or anecdotal thought about Man that we see flashing up behind Satin's swinish state, his incoherent speech, his excitement when drunk and his depression when hung-over? In the course of a thorough drinking bout, these three seedy intellectuals of the lower depths, played by Vadim Skvirsky, Kirill Syomin and Artur Kharitonenko, engage in endless debates about the Russian Idea.

The Russian Idea remains unfathomed; it remains in the lower depths. Man – that doesn't have a proud sound[2]. But it does have a poignant and tender one. Unexpectedly, Lev Ehrenburg and his troupe imbue the play with love. Counterpointing visible events, in the characters' subconscious as it were, we hear fiery Neapolitan songs. Unexpressed, bestial, generous, hysterical, cruel and passionate, love seizes them all: Kleshch and Anna, Kostylyov and Vassilissa, Vaska and Natasha. The Baron (Daniil Shigapov) and Nastia (Svetlana Obidina) are, unknown to them, linked by an inseverable bond: they only have one pair of boots for the two of them, so they can only leave their dwelling place one at a time; and each of them feels with a kind of sixth sense when the other needs their dose of the drug more urgently.

Tatyana Kolganova and Konstanin Shelestov end the performance with an effervescent eruption of love: the crippled Tatar woman beats and kisses Bubnov with all her might, as if they had been craving for one another their whole lives, and he desperately shouts a line that is not in Gorky: 'Where have you been? I've been looking for you!' Sensual obsession dies last, if at all. Lev Ehrenburg discovers catharsis in love, in the inexplicable resistance of all that is alive against all social realities and against all rational reasons for dying.

Translated by Mischa Gabowitsch

Grotesque and naive love affair: Anna (Helga Filippova) and Kleshch (Yuri Yevdokimov) in The Lower Depths *(Foto: Theatre NeBDT)*

[2] 'Man – that has a proud sound' is a famous quote from Gorky's play, known to every schoolchild in Soviet times.

review

About the Author:
Nikolay Pessochinsky is an art and theatre scholar. He teaches at the Saint Petersburg Theatre Academy and is a fellow of the Russian Institute for the History of the Arts. His teaching and research interests include theatre directing in 20th century Russia, especially Vsevolod Meyerhold, as well as contemporary directors.

Reading Suggestion:
Robert Russell, Andrew Barratt (eds.), Russian Theatre in the Age of Modernism, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990.

analysis

Theatre in Saint Petersburg since Perestroika

Marina Dmitrevskaya

In Soviet times, the 'second capital' received too few state funds; there was less political and spiritual freedom and more bureaucracy and conservatism than in Moscow, not least in the sphere of culture. Many artists chose or were forced to leave Saint Petersburg in order to survive, literally and artistically. This tendency continues to this day. But time and again fresh undercurrents have taken shape below the official surface. Instead of developing continuously, theatre life is going through high and low tides: periods of conservatism and stagnation alternate with times of renewal.
Today, there are forty venues on Saint Petersburg's municipal payroll: twenty-two theatres, eight musical theatres and ten children's and puppet theatres. Only the Mariinsky Opera and the former imperial Alexandrinsky Theatre (Russia's oldest theatre), both of them important historic buildings, receive more generous funding from the federal budget.

Saint Petersburg is a tough city. Unlike their Moscow colleagues, Saint Petersburg theatre critics do not welcome new directors with open arms or package them as shiny Pop Idols. At first, they do nothing. They examine every newcomer carefully; they wait and listen. This attitude is deliberate: it is their way of testing whether the new director fits seamlessly into the city's cultural space.

Saint Petersburg is a tough, hard city. How many people has it sacrificed to its 'cultural space'! Sometimes you cannot even see the space because of all the sacrifices. And yet it does exist: a stage designed and set once and for all to which every new director contributes in their own way. To make it here, you have to enter a dialogue with Saint Petersburg's culture.

Maybe that is the reason why the provocatively obscene *New Drama* festival has been unsuccessful here. Conversely, this may also be why the contest for young Saint Petersburg playwrights attracted so little nationwide attention: while in both contests all the plays sent in were imperfect, in this case it was obvious they had been written by well-bred boys who had read too many books on cold and damp Saint Petersburg evenings…

For years, there was really only one theatre and one director: the Bolshoy Drama Theatre (*Bolshoy Dramatichesky Teatr*, BDT) headed by Georgy 'Gogo' Tovstonogov. He was one of the legendary theatre directors of the past century. For two decades starting in 1960, after the first 'thaw', this clever practitioner of theatre politics ensured an interesting repertoire and worked with an ensemble that had grown up over the years, gradually turning the BDT into the country's number one

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theatre. Tovstonogov revitalised the tradition of psychological realism, which had been distorted by Soviet ideology; but he also acted like a little Tsar, tolerating no rivals. He sent his numerous directing students from the Theatre Institute out into Russia's vast expanses to prove themselves: few were allowed to put their skills to the test in the master's vicinity. Thus it was only natural that with Tovstonogov's death in 1989 the city's theatre life suffered a serious setback, clearly falling behind Moscow's.

Until, once more, everything crystallised around one director: Lev Dodin. A rising star since the 1980s and younger than Tovstonogov, he was his bitter opponent. Born in 1944, Dodin had been humiliated by the party in Soviet times like so many other artists. With the onset of perestroika, he was finally allowed to head his own theatre, the *Maly Dramaticheski Teatr*[1] or MDT for short. In those years it was a stronghold of the Saint Petersburg intelligentsia, its beacon of hope and its mouthpiece: with his first productions, Dodin brought long-repressed historical truths to light, uncluttered the stage using stylisation, took traditional realism to a higher level and stirred his audience, across generations, with the his great troupe and the constructive, warm atmosphere of his early productions. He was celebrated like no other Saint Petersburg director, toured the whole world… and went through several artistic and ethical crises.

The Directors of the New Wave of Directors: Rise…

In the early 1990s, the so-called New Wave of directors arrived on Saint Petersburg's theatre scene. Every one of them professed a particular type of theatre; each had his own troupe; and all were 'homeless', carrying their theatre from venue to venue like a snail shell. In the wake of the New Wave, theatres reluctantly came to accept new aesthetic concepts that challenged the one-sided tradition. They staged once-prohibited works; sometimes, hesitantly, a contemporary play. The old proscenium had had its day: the large theatres were shunned or remodelled; small stages were *en vogue*. In the new basement or studio theatres, the audience would sit very close to the actors, a concept which proved highly attractive. These directors saved the city's theatre scene (bar the MDT, of course) from its paralysis. They became the pride of Saint Petersburg. Their work was guided by cultural programmes, schools and aesthetic ideas, although in times of post-modernism, none of them exclusively aligned himself with one specific trend.

Grigory Dityatkovsky's productions of Joseph Brodsky's *Marbles*, Strindberg's *The Father* and Racine's *Phèdre* at the BDT created a furore. His work revolves around the theme of culture, and the dialogue with cultural eras and styles.

Grigory Kozlov continued the tradition of psychological theatre: he staged Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* at the Theatre for Young Audiences (*Teatr yunogo zritelya*), *PS* (based on short stories by E.T.A. Hoffmann) at the Alexandrinsky Theatre and Alexander Ostrovsky's *The Forest* at the Liteyny (*Teatr na Liteynom*).

Yury Butussov staged Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Büchner's *Woyzeck*—as a bloody spectacle—and Camus' *Caligula*, in which he portrayed a state's megalomania and disintegration as a carnival of horrors. The rough rhythm of his productions and his actors' youthful energy and brilliant performances ensured him a cult following.

Viktor Kramer, a former student of Tovstonogov's, founded a small theatre called *Farces*. With his talent for comedy, he created a whole range of wonderful productions: *Farces*, a play based on medieval farces; *The Shockheaded Fellows from Golopleki* based on early plays by Ivan Turgenev;

[1] Literally: Small Drama Theatre.

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Dostoyevsky's *The Village of Stepanchikovo* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Kramer's trademark is psychological eccentricity with a Chaplinesque touch.

Alexander Galibin's production of Alexey Shipenko's *LA-Fünf in der Luft*[2] was a masterly combination of conceptual and psychological theatre.

Vladimir Tumanov staged wonderful productions of Nina Sadur's plays—a powerful Russian version of absurd drama—and Olga Mukhina's *Tanya-Tanya*, a more lyrical variety.

Andrey Moguchy founded the Formal Theatre, becoming the only avant-garde artist on Saint Petersburg's theatre scene.

Anatoly Praudin was heir to Meyerholdian style acting, but he also continued the tradition of psychological theatre and had a predilection for keen paradoxes.[3]

...and Fall

As the years went by, every one of the young directors went through his own kind of creative crisis, and the New Wave hit the banks of the River Neva in a soft surf and dissipated. Fame went to the director's heads and made them ill: they started taking their Golden Masks and other prizes too seriously and were all afraid not to live up to expectations. They felt obliged to come up with new productions even if they had nothing to say. Working conditions also took their toll. With a few exceptions, the old guard of directors still controlled the theatres, wielding the power over who received chances and who did not. The New Wave directors were under pressure to prove themselves on large stages, watched by authoritarian directors or administrators, with small budgets and scheming ensembles.

A bland version of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and exaggerated financial claims put an end to Dityatkovsky's career at the BDT.

Alexander Galibin tried to master the huge space of the venerable Alexandrinsky Theatre, which resulted in lifeless productions. After three years at the helm of the Novosibirsk Globe Theatre, he returned to the Alexandrinsky as an ambitious chief director, but all his productions were stillborn, artistically speaking. After barely three years he was ousted.

The Forest, *directed by Grigory Kozlov. Shchastlivtsev played by Alexey Devochenko (Photo: Archive Liteyny)*

Grigory Kozlov, a master of psychological drama about interpersonal relations, failed miserably when he imagined himself to be a second Meyerhold and tried his hand at Style Acting.

Vladimir Tumanov lost his bearings and any kind of preference and began to pick theatres and plays at

[2] 'LA-5 in the air': Lavochkin-5 (LA-5) was a Soviet combat plane in the Second World War.

[3] For Meyerhold, style acting was a kind of theatre that stresses the distance between the actor and his part, thus revealing the artificiality of the stage, as opposed to psychological theatre with its (illusory) empathy.

random.

And then Moscow started calling, as it was running out of home-grown directorial talent. Dityatkovsky was too intellectual to make it there; Butussov successfully established himself as a freelance director with a band of loyal actors; Viktor Kramer stages summit meetings, gala events, corporate celebrations and official anniversaries such as Saint Petersburg's 300th. Others moved on, looking for work elsewhere.

From the point of view of theatre directors and business managers looking to replenish thin budgets, young, experimenting directors are less useful than international festivals, as successfully staged by the Baltic House (*Teatr 'Baltiysky dom'*), among other theatres. For many venues, the recipe for success has been to intersperse a commercially attractive programme (i.e. light, lowbrow fare for the masses) with the odd big name. This enables big theatres such as the Kommissarzhevsky, the Lensoviet or the Nevsky Comedy Theatre to lead a comfortable existence. Who would blame them? The BDT, whose long-vacant directorship has now been filled by Timur Cheidze, is still steering its time-honoured, solidly traditional course. Saint Petersburg largely leaves it to Moscow to foster young, talented experimenters.

Moscow productions may be more tasteless; but on the whole the past three or four seasons have been a period of stagnation for Saint Petersburg theatre. For me as a critic, only two of the directors mentioned remain interesting as interlocutors in a creative dialogue: Anatoly Praudin and Andrey Moguchy.

Petersburg Hopes: Anatoly Praudin…

Praudin (born in 1961) is engaged in a consistent and sincere quest in both ethics and aesthetics. He is trying out different genres, questioning every word in the text, his own interpretation of it, and even the author. He started his career at the Yekaterinburg Theatre for Young Audiences at a time when this type of venue offered the greatest freedom to playwrights. One of his first productions—*Judas Iscariot*, based on a short story by Leonid Andreev—was a kind of apocryphal narrative about the inseverable bond between Jesus and Judas, the teacher and the disciple. Although starting out as an atheist, Praudin turned to biblical themes and the question of faith and the absolute in the 1990s. In his production *Sisyphus and the Rock* by Natalya Skorokhod, he essentially affirmed the Christian idea of humility, albeit in a Kantian understanding: it was a play about the 'starry heavens above us and the moral law within us'. Suffice this as a sketch of Praudin's ethical search.

His aesthetic search has gone through several stages. Initially he clearly preferred style acting; he was inspired by Meyerhold, using his method of 'montage of attractions', analysing the text in paradoxical manners and interspersing it with stunts. An excellent example among many productions of this kind in both Yekaterinburg and Saint Petersburg is Praudin's *Through the Looking Glass* based on Lewis Carroll's book.

During his short time as chief director of the Saint Petersburg Theatre for Young Audiences, Praudin elaborated the idea of a 'theatre of children's grief': 'By "theatre of children's grief" I mean theatre without illusions. Illusions take us beyond reality, making us believe in the possibility of an imaginary, fairy-tale existence. To do good and hand out presents is easy when there's joy all around. But try to remain as magnanimous in grief.'

Saint Petersburg's cultural bureaucrats (for a bureaucratic city it still is) did not allow Praudin to realise his ideas at the Theatre of the Young Viewer. With his ten actors, he found refuge at the Baltic House, far from all the great theatre

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empires – despite the fact that he is a master of large-scale theatre and easily fills large stages with substantive dramatic text. The aesthetic solution he chose was to accept his predicament and develop a deliberately ascetic type of directing.

A play that was programmatic in this respect was his production of Alexander Ostrovsky's *Without a Dowry*, staged in a single room: an outstanding production that was based on precise character analysis, intricate dramaturgic work and profound human simplicity.

In *Goodbye Cinderella* based on Yevgeny Shvarts, the insulted and humiliated protagonist is a clumsy, bespectacled girl who lectures her father, likes to insist on her rights and quietly nurtures her pride. She is visited by a band of comedians led by a fairy, and soon Cinderella is doing acting drills with imaginary objects; she is so thoroughly drawn into the 'given circumstances' that the imaginary space becomes real and she finds herself at a ball. Similarly, the youthful page identifies with the part of the prince so much that Cinderella does not recognise him. How should she? The prince is a camouflaged soldier injured in the Chechen War; his contused, dangling arm resembles a terrifying claw.

In the end, love carries the day. Love and nothing but love, nurtured within Praudin's own troupe, generated by their own creative aspirations and that faith in theatre for which Anatoly Praudin's works are famous.

Praudin's latest production is *The House at Pooh Corner* based on Alan A. Milne's book. God has long been dead, as we know from Nietzsche. Christopher Robin—Milne's son, whose teddy served as the model for Milne's stories—died in 1996. He lived a long life, well into an age when high-tech has destroyed the cosiness of the English children's room. His cuddly toys grew old with him, even though as metaphors they are immortal; they now live in this godless theatre world of cool, shiny corrugated-aluminium pipes.

I could easily indulge in a long description of the sketches, techniques, thematic arabesques and playful interaction with the children in the audience that make up this unhurried, finely-wrought work of theatrical art. But more importantly, I should note that this long-prepared production picks up the threads that have been central to Praudin's earlier work and constitute his theatrical philosophy. He *is* Pooh. In a world where life goes on even though God is dead, salvation, for Praudin, lies in creativity, in theatre.

…and Andrey Moguchy

Like Praudin, Andrey Moguchy is engaged in an artistic process and has been going his own way. Moguchy, who has a troupe of his own but is not affiliated with any specific theatre, likes to mix different types of texts and experiments with formal, 'inanimate elements'. I greatly enjoyed his *PRO Turandot* at the Comedians' Shelter (*Priiut komediantov*), with sets and costumes designed by Emil Kapelyush. The first line of the play is 'Well, that's it', spoken by three 'proto-eunuchs' (Vitaly Saltykov, Dmitry Gotsdiner and Andrey Noskov), who replace the famous *zanni*[4] of the *commedia dell'arte*. Why eunuchs? Because they are purely spiritual persons who do not need anything from others. Moguchy's production almost entirely consists of *lazzi*[5] by the three eunuchs, who retell a famous *fiaba* by Carlo Gozzi, constantly interrupting each other.

Moguchy's production preserves a kind of primeval memory of art and reality, which, however, is not central to the play. Gozzi's marvellous story can be retold in many different ways. Who would have thought that Turandot's riddles would prove so similar to contemporary TV shows! The eunuch orchestra rejoices, Turandot the game-show host is nervous, the audience is

[4] Zanni – the nameless servants.
[5] Lazzi – improvised digressions from the main plot, whose length is determined by the actors.

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kept in suspense… The third riddle makes pale Calaf faint! He is asked to identify the person whom the viewers can see on a screen: a man 'in a judo outfit… wearing a miner's helmet' who 'used to wear a pilot's cap and writes books… has fathered two daughters and helped a dog give birth … and he speaks German so well! He rules the world…' The viewers whoop with joy as they await the solution of this blank-verse riddle; they are sure he will say 'Putin'. But as Calaf comes to his senses, he gives the correct answer: 'Arnold Schwarzenegger!'

Moguchy's *Petersburg*, based on Andrey Bely's novel, is played in the summer on the White Nights, in the courtyard of the Mikhaylovsky (or Engineer's) Palace where Tsar Paul I was murdered. In Russian, *bely* means 'white'. Amusingly, Andrey Moguchy (literally 'mighty Andrey') produces a work by his namesake, the 'white Andrey', during the White Nights, whose provocative beauty puts Saint Petersburg's shadowy quality into relief.

The novel is itself thoroughly provocative, an endless system of provocations. At a time when the old culture has evaporated, Moguchy deliberately unstitches old garb, using the shreds to sew a new reality which takes the courtyard of the Engineer's Palace as its starting point.

The audience are seated in small cabins lined up along an elevated wooden stage. They are warned that the tattered cardboard walls may start moving – and when they do, viewers should watch the cabin attendant, a girl wearing a baseball cap, rather than the stage. Thus we alternately see a fragment of the action and the whole stage; why, I cannot explain. It is a game. Not a dramatic game, but one with textures, spaces and living characters.

In a recent interview, Moguchy says he is growing increasingly detached from theatrical work, partly due to its commercialisation, one of the main tendencies in contemporary Russian theatre: 'I believe that today, theatre is very strongly influenced by the culture of corporate parties. This is what countless directors do to earn a living, and working for customers transforms their mentality. I think that those who do this kind of work slowly mutate.'

From a place where people witness strong emotions, theatre is gradually turning into a place of light entertainment; from a form of art it is turning into a small business. In recent years, Saint Petersburg has produced no outstanding directors. All we can do is wait.

Translated by Mischa Gabowitsch

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Marina Dmitrevskaya is an art and theatre scholar and a member of the Saint Petersburg Writers' Union. She teaches at the Saint Petersburg State Theatre Academy and writes about contemporary Russian theatre (Rezo Gabriadze, Alexander Volodin). She also writes screenplays for television. Since 1992, she has been the founding editor-in-chief of the independent Petersburg Theatre Journal (PTJ).

Reading Suggestions:

- Robert Leach, Revolutionary Theatre, London; NY: Routledge, 1994
- Robert Leach, Makers of modern theatre: an introduction, London; NY: Routledge, 2004
- Michael Chekhov, To the Actor, NY, 1985

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Director Lev Dodin and his Maly Drama Theatre (MDT) in Saint Petersburg

Nadezhda Tarshis

Lev Dodin and his *Maly Dramatichesky Teatr* (MDT) in Saint Petersburg stand out even against the diverse backdrop of Russian theatre. Paradoxically, Dodin's special status is due to his fidelity to a venerable Russian tradition: he rehearses extensively (for years!), almost making it seem as though he considers the process more important than the result. He involves his actors so deeply in the emotional fabric of every play that the characters' problems seem to engulf them.

During rehearsals, the master usually casts every actor for every role. As is customary, they immerse themselves in their parts using stage exercises: by improvising more or less freely on stage, they delve ever more deeply into the work, be it prose or a play. They collectively elaborate multiple versions of the text and multiple ways to play their parts. Dodin often waits until shortly before the premiere to decide who plays which part. This total immersion lends the play a special maturity, a rich, tangible aura. It is this working method that accounts for the distinctive epic quality of Dodin's scenic compositions.

Indeed, Dodin provides even the most conventional dramas with an epic scope. His plays are always about a specific state of the world, whether he places O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* against the backdrop of a primeval rock landscape, or Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* between mighty pyramidal haystacks.

Dodin, who is now 62, had his fair share of theatrical homelessness early in his career and was obliged to have his plays vetted by the censors in humiliating procedures. He laid the foundations of his fame with *Brothers and Sisters*, based on the works of Fyodor Abramov, one of the best 'village prose' writers of the 1960s and 1970s. The play is still on, and the long running time has only increased its epic might.

Dodin's theatre always carries a kind of epic message; the form of directing and acting, however, may change from one production to another. *Brothers and Sisters* is an MDT classic which has impressed audiences the world over with its unity of ethics and aesthetics. This is how the Italian director Giorgio Strehler described it: 'This play is a penetrating message about the fact that all men are brothers, about the value of human life and the need for human solidarity in the face of ever new political catastrophes.'

The original actors were from a class that was trained by Arkady Katsman and Lev Dodin at the Leningrad Theatre Academy; they have themselves become new brothers and sisters. By delving into Abramov's epic world, they have managed to produce an extraordinarily resonant rendering of the past in the present. In that first troupe, the pace was set by Pyotr Semak, who still plays Mikhail Pryaslin up to this day. The actors who joined the play in turn later became excellent pillars of the classical structure of *Brothers and Sisters.* The play has been a stunning theatrical experience for several generations of viewers. But the dramatic knot of the modern world's problems will not be unravelled by Strehler's words, even though they might well be engraved into the pediment of Dodin's theatre.

With *Demons*, the theatre tries to link different eras. The play looks at the contemporary situation from an historical perspective and sounds out the extent to which Dostoyevksy's great novel resonates with modern times. The play lasts several hours and grants viewers no 'light at the end of the tunnel', but the actors' heroic *tour de force* in itself has a cathartic effect, drawing the actors and the viewers closer together.

The MDT's other productions—*Gaudeamus* and *Claustrophobia*, based on contemporary Russian prose works, Anton Chekhov's *Untitled Play* and

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Chevengur, an adaptation of Andrei Platonov's novel—are brilliant works of scenic art. With each one of them, Dodin makes a momentous and passionate if bitter statement. The MDT's actors are a special troupe: most of them were taught by the master himself. Every new class graduating from the Saint Petersburg Theatre Academy adds a tone of its own; and yet they all profess the same artistic faith – they all have the same dramatic blood group. They cannot act other than by putting their hearts into their work and investing their parts with their entire personality.

Even in productions that are essentially based on teamwork, some actors in Dodin's troupe stand out by virtue of their strong artistic personalities. Natalya Akimova, Sergey Bekhterev, Sergey Vlassov, Igor Ivanov, Sergey Kuryshev, Pyotr Semak, Natalya Fomenko and Tatyana Shestakova are great masters of their craft. And some in the next generation, including Maria Nikiforova and Xenia Rappoport, have already delivered outstanding performances.

Brothers and Sisters (1958–78)
adapted from Fyodor Abramov's tetralogy of novels *Pryasliny* that chronicle life in a Northern Russian village. Abramov was one of the so-called village prose writers; using the Pryaslin family as an example, he portrays the dire state of the countryside and the brutal destruction of lifestyles after forcible collectivisation in Soviet times. The central question he addresses, however, is the individual's responsibility to society.
Only one of the novels, *Two Winters and Three Summers*, has been translated into English:
a) by Jacqueline Edwards and Mitchell Schneider, with an introduction by Maurice Friedberg, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1984;
b) by D. B. Powers and Doris C. Powers, Ann Arbor (Michigan): Ardis, 1984.

Chevengur (1930) by Andrey Platonov
is a satirical and fairytale-like novel about the construction of socialism, the longing for a communist paradise on earth, and doubts about it. Platonov's works were barely published during his lifetime, and he is considered one of the most enigmatic writers of the 20th century.
Translated by Anthony Olcott, Ann Arbor (Michigan): Ardis, 1978 (a new translation by Robert Chandler is forthcoming at Harvill Press)

Demons (1871) by Fyodor Dostoyevsky
is a great philosophico-artistic novel about the question of belief and unbelief in God, about the disintegration of an apostate who acts as a 'man-god' and turns from a nihilist into a terrorist.
Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, New York: A.A. Knopf, 1994

Life and Fate (early 1960s) by Vassily Grossman
was published in Lausanne in 1980 and in Moscow in 1988. This powerful, profoundly humanistic epopee provides an analysis of and philosophical reflection on Soviet reality at the climax of its history, the battle of Stalingrad, and exposes the ensuing period of totalitarianism's anti-Semitism. The historical facts are tested against the touchstone of individual goodness and personal decisions.
Translated by Robert Chandler, London: Collins Harvill, 1985, paperback edition 2006

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The combination of ensemble work and individual acting performance is a trademark of Dodin's theatre. The actors delve into the all-embracing world of his fantasy and are connected to each other by numerous threads. As a result, every performance is organic, polyphonic and many-layered.

Every MDT production is a kind of existential message to the viewers, who are in turn expected to respond emotionally. Dodin's latest production, *King Lear*, is no exception. Dodin does not interpret the play as a cosmic tragedy: for him, it is about no more or less than the breakdown of interpersonal relations in a family and, accordingly, in the world. There is nothing cosmic about the storm scene; however, the production offers a powerful portrayal of homelessness in a world stripped of the familiar human bonds. In playing the homeless King Lear, Pyotr Semak clearly draws on his Mishka Pryaslin, the mainstay of the family in the Abramov trilogy.

Both roles are a miracle of scenic harmony, conveying the director's message as is only possible here, on the stage of the MDT, which Dodin untiringly develops and defends as his own 'house'. Currently Dodin is rehearsing an adaptation of Vassily Grossman's novel *Life and Fate* with a new class of first-year students. They jointly visit former Stalinist concentration camps, immersing themselves once more in the tragic epos of Russian history, as he did with an earlier group a quarter of a century ago.

Translated by Mischa Gabowitsch

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Nadezhda Tarshis is an art and drama scholar. She is a Professor at the Saint Petersburg Theatre Academy and Fellow of the Russian Institute for the History of the Arts. She specialises in theatre history.

Reading Suggestions:

Maria Shevtsova, Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre: process to performance, London; NY: Routledge, 2004.

Appendix: Dodin's Foreign Tours

Lev Dodin's *Maly Dramatichesky Teatr* ('Small' Drama Theatre or MDT for short) sees itself as a European theatre. All of Dodin's productions are in Russian, but since 1991 they have usually had their premieres in Western Europe, including several co-productions in Germany. There are political and economic reasons for this strategy: it has secured Dodin contacts with a range of European festivals and enabled him, among other things, to stage operas abroad, especially in France.

However, the MDT's foreign tours (not only in Europe, but also in the Far East and America) did not initially meet with success. In 1987, when the troupe gave a performance at East Berlin's *Berliner Ensemble* to celebrate Berlin's 750th anniversary, free tickets were handed out just to fill the auditorium. In 1991, Dodin's production of Dostoyevsky's *Demons* was first performed at the *Theaterformen* festival in Braunschweig; in 1992, he took his *Gaudeamus* to the Salzburg Festival. *Claustrophobia* was first performed in Paris in 1993.

In 1994, when the MDT presented Dodin's adaptation of Abramov's novel *The House* at the *Schaubühne* as part of the Berlin *Festwochen*, the show was sold out down to the last seat. Dodin used this Russian family saga to depict the internal decay of imposed socialism.

In 1999, the MDT opened Weimar's City of Cul-

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ture Year with its adaptation of Andrey Platonov's novel *Chevengur*. Reactions were mixed, as the play was gloomy and required intimate knowledge of early Soviet history. In 2004, Dodin presented Anton Chekhov's *Untitled Play* (also known as *Platonov*) at the *e-werk* in Weimar. It is a play about a society that has lost its ideals and is therefore sliding into the abyss of history. His latest production, *King Lear*, had its premiere in Milan in the spring of 2006 and gave guest performances in London in October of 2006 with great success.

(compiled by Tatiana Bezrodnaya, Bremen)

The December Issue of *kultura* will discuss the culture of translation in Russia.
Guest editor: Olga Radetzkaja (Berlin)