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Alive, Kicking – and Kicking Back: Russia's Golden Mask Festival 2015

The Golden Mask and National Theatre Award and Festival, founded in Moscow in 1994, has showcased some of the most exciting theatre to be found across Russia's vast territories: 'theatre' including opera, ballet, contemporary dance, puppetry, and newer forms that have taken root with changing artistic practices. Maria Shevtsova's brief overview of the 2015 Russian Case, a selection for foreign producers and critics, prominently features 'new drama', not least because of the difficulties recently imposed on Teatr.doc, a founding player within this powerful movement. Major young directors appear here, with crossover to their work as represented in past editions of the Russian Case, and with reference to current socio-political factors. Reviews of earlier festivals appeared in *NTQ* 85, 95, and 103. Maria Shevtsova, Professor at Goldsmiths, University of London, is co-editor of *New Theatre Quarterly*. Her most recent book is the co-authored *Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Directing* (2013). Her seminal *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre: Process to Performance* (2004) has been translated into Romanian, Korean, and Mandarin and, in 2014, Russian.

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NOW IN ITS TWENTY-FIRST EDITION, the Golden Mask and National Theatre Award and Festival of 2015 was a rich and varied event including ballet, contemporary dance, and opera. The Russian Case, a selection for foreign critics and producers, usually cannot accommodate opera and ballet, and so concentrates on what these days in Moscow is called 'classical theatre', 'new drama', and 'multidisciplinary theatre' (embracing inter-medial and related hybrids). But the Russian Case offers some contemporary dance, depending on its availability for programming. The curators for 2015 were four – double the number in past years, suggesting that the range of productions to choose from has increased significantly, as have the categories for competition purposes. The year's curators were Pavel Rudnev, a managing director of the Moscow Art Theatre, Anna Banasyukevich from the Lubimovka New Drama Festival, and Alexei Kiselev and Elizaveta Spivakovskaya, who combine their roles of critic with other responsibilities in the field of the theatre. Rudnev and Banasyukevich are also critics.

As in previous Russian Case selections, verbatim theatre was prominent, having been

sustained now for more than a decade by the example of Teatr.doc, founded in 2002 by playwrights Yelena Gremina and Mikhail Ugarov. In 1999, this pioneering couple had invited the Royal Court to run seminars in verbatim techniques in Moscow. The experience, together with inspiration from the Yekaterinburg Drama School, established in the Urals in 1996 by actor, director, and playwright Nikolay Kolyada, generated a strong crop of specifically Russian verbatim and documentary-type theatre works. Kolyada's was the first school of playwriting in Russia, and one of his students, Yekaterina Vasilyeva, presented her *One Day We Will All Be Happy*, a schoolgirl's monologue split between two voices and thus shared by two performers, for which Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of an internal dialogue is beautifully apt.

Another regional work was *City Day* by the Voronezh Chamber Theatre, which, this time, was a compilation of monologues from Voronezh residents performed 'raw', that is, pretty well as the actors and director Mikhail Bychkov had found them. Rather than bringing in a playwright to shape the material, Bychkov gave it a dramaturgical structure himself, with input from the actors; and this



Left: a schoolgirl's two voices in *One Day We Will All Be Happy* (photo: Polina Kozlova). Below: from *City Day*, a compilation of 'raw' monologues (photo: Aleksey Bychkov).

meant judicious placement and juxtaposition of the colours, tones, and themes of the monologues – a young woman's reflections on her love for another woman, an adolescent's aspirations (sung by a sassy actress with humorous wanna-be-celebrity abandon), one man's uncertainties about his marriage, another's about his infidelities, and so on. The whole was a vibrant tapestry of a day in the life of a city, its people, solo or grouped together, evoking loneliness as well as urban movement. Although perhaps a little too attached to the everyday (*byt* in the Russian literary tradition), it deservedly won the jury's special prize for drama.

Presence was a documentary-type piece of another kind that I am tempted to call a 'living archive': it assembled archival material for live performance which performers

duplicated live, incarnating archives in the moment. Performed by a new generation of actors from the Taganka Theatre and directed by Semyon Aleksandrovsky, *Presence* is based on Yury Lyubimov's legendary 1964 *Good Person of Szechuan*, which features the no less legendary actor and protest singer Vladimir Vysotsy. Legendary though they may be for an older generation, the young (unless already theatre buffs) are hardly likely to know them and, in this respect, the video footage of Lyubimov's production is a revelation. Two separate couples on either side of the stage reproduced the episode on the screen, while spectators wore headphones to catch the words of both the real-time and archive actors. It was interesting enough – the footage was wonderful, amazingly undated – but the question remains as to why it



Presence, a 'living archive' performed by a new generation of actors from the Taganka Theatre and directed by Semyon Aleksandrovsky (photo: Natalia Feoktistova).



was done, other than for technologically explorative and educational reasons.

Presence appears to be part of a trend detectable in recent Russian theatre to 'record', by means of performance, both Russia's past and present-in-process. The trend is not only one of preserving or protecting memory, but of making memory exist, of making it *be* when circumstances seem to be – and may well actually be – conspiring against it. Teatr.doc has been instrumental in activating memory through the work it has created as well as mentored, and *Vyatlag*, in its mentored group, is no exception. *Vyatlag* is little more than a reading of notes written by a Latvian farmer Arthur Stradinsh, who had been exiled to a Siberian labour camp in 1941 for allegedly anti-Soviet activities. A non-smoker, he used his ration of cigarette paper to write his day-to-day observations – bread rations, dysentery, how there were thieves among the Latvians in the camp – kept in a tobacco box, thus eluding camp authorities.

Director Boris Pavlovich read the small pieces of paper, dated and methodically set aside when he had finished, without vocal inflections, as if the facts really did speak for themselves. A woman, who occasionally sang songs from the Krasnoyarsk region in Siberia, where Stradinsh had been incarcerated and where Pavlovich had been given Stradinsh's papers, provided something of a geo-cultural context for the verbal-vocal recital.

Teatr.doc's taste for non-acted theatre, for a theatre that is presented in a matter-of-fact manner rather than visibly felt by its cast, has not been attacked – at least not openly. However, its reputation for airing social and political critique has led it into open trouble in the past six months. The first sign of recrimination came in November last year, when the theatre's landlord unilaterally rescinded, without warning, the contract for its basement black-box space. Teatr.doc quickly found new, light-filled premises that it renovated at its own expense to be ready for *Vyatlag*.

The second sign came in May 2015 as Gremina and Ugarov premiered a production about the Bolotnaya Square demonstrations for 'fair elections', the first of which had taken place in December 2011, on the eve of Vladimir Putin's re-election as President for a third term of office. Shortly after the first few performances (text by Yekaterinburg playwright Polina Borodina), Gremina received a notice of eviction. Police had been present at these performances.

Clashes on Bolotnaya Square between protesters against the status quo and pro-government sympathizers continued into 2012 and 2013, resulting in hundreds of arrests and new laws on 'unauthorized actions'.

Borodina's play is based on interviews with family members of convicted people who are still in prison. There had been a

precedent as far as the subject matter was concerned. In 2011, Teatr.doc had performed Gremina's play *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* on the allegedly unlawful imprisonment of the lawyer Sergey Magnitsky, who, tortured in prison, was denied adequate medical attention and died there in 2009. It was shown at the 2012 Golden Mask and, since then, has had considerable impact both in Russia and abroad. Teatr.doc's commitment to freedom of speech and action has made it vulnerable in an increasingly repressive climate since 2012 (the year, too, of the Pussy Riot affair), and the forced cancellation of *The Bolotnaya Square Case*, however temporary (or not), is part of the control that seems to be spreading into the arts.

Pro-democracy workers in the cultural sector and human rights activists across the board commonly believe that Teatr.doc's two evictions are linked to government-official reprisal at some level. It is known that the second eviction occurred after the theatre's landlords had received an order from a superior office (unspecified) to annul its lease. But it is important to notice, too, that the theatre's second eviction followed the *Tannhäuser* scandal that erupted after two performances in December 2014 of the production directed by Timofey Kulyabin at the Novosibirsk Theatre of Opera and Ballet. Kulyabin, director at the Red Torch theatre company in Novosibirsk, had turned Wagner's wayward pilgrim into a filmmaker, who shoots his film in Venus's grotto (Wagner's Venusberg). The production may not have attracted undue attention had it not been for its poster, which showed Christ on the cross in Venus's vagina – a shot from the supposed film of *Tannhäuser*.

In January 2015, the Metropolitan of the Orthodox Church took Boris Mezdrich, the artistic and managing director of the Opera and Ballet theatre, and Kulyabin to court for 'offending the feelings of Orthodox believers'. They were acquitted, but, by then, conservative religious and political pressure groups had intervened, as had the Russian Minister for Culture. Mezdrich was sacked, and the production was first closed down, then removed from the repertoire altogether.

On 7 March 2015 Lev Dodin, one of many theatre figures who supported Mezdrich and Kulyabin throughout, wrote a public letter denouncing censorship; he also pointed out that notions of 'offence' changed historically, while history usually acquitted the accused. Winner of three Golden Mask awards over the years for best director, Dodin saw his *Cherry Orchard* of the 2014 season receive the 2015 Golden Mask for the best large-scale production (it was not shown in the 2014 Russian Case because of inconvenient dates, although I saw it in St Petersburg).

Meanwhile, Kulyabin's inventive, graceful *Onegin*, which, by contrast, I had seen at the 2014 Russian Case, had won the jury's special prize at that edition. His *Shakespeare's Sonnets* in this year's selection has not received particular attention, regardless of the *Tannhäuser* debacle. The production, nominated for Golden Mask inclusion some time before that affair (so no political lobbying was involved), was a dance-like, slowly evolving work whose figures were silhouetted against long glass windows, or who folded into the bays of these windows or into the floor.

Performing in low, indirect light, they merged lyrical sequences into sharper and sometimes violent ones that alluded to the



Shakespeare's Sonnets, 'a dance-like, slowly evolving work whose figures were silhouetted against long glass windows' (photo: Aleksandr Ivanishin).



Another scene from *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (photo: Aleksandr Ivanishin).

evanescence of love and beauty. A voice-off recited the Sonnets (numbers 5, 44, 97, 12, 73, and 65, if I have jotted them down correctly), but it was not so much the content of the Sonnets that mattered as how fragments from them evoked an association here, an atmosphere there, a musical line somewhere else. Piano sounds played onstage trailed off in counterpoint with silence.

Not as certain of its direction as *Onegin* had been, this production shows Kulyabin looking for an aesthetic that touches the surface of emotion, but does not give in to it. Entering into his later twenties, he is a very young director, even by Russia's draconian standards according to which directors in their forties are considered 'young' in art.

In a similarly whimsical vein, but not as lyrical, was Konstantin Bogomolov's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, which performed the impossible of staging Rabelais's novel by simply making the theme of time and aging central to the production. Narrative intercepts action. The narrator, Alcofribas (Alcofribas Nasier was Rabelais's pseudonym)

stands at a desk-podium at the side of a space composed of different spaces that draw attention to this or that event or allow several events to be played out simultaneously. This type of spatial organization is typical of Bogomolov. He put it to excellent use in his 2013 *The Karamazovs*, where a modernist, deliberately over-lavish interior updated Dostoevsky's debate on sex, death, corruption, and God (yes, and the Orthodox league picketed the Moscow Art Theatre, mistakenly attributing Dostoevsky's provocations to Bogomolov's brilliant dramaturgy).

Here, carefully broken-up space mixes a comfortable living room, a business office, and a bar whose lurid neon-lit *Trink* is a joke on Rabelais's *A boire!*, the first words spoken, at his birth, by baby Gargantua. A baby cap on an aging actor neatly captures Rabelais's musings on how the very seeds of age are lodged in youth; a couch serves as a carriage taking Gargantua/Pantagruel to Paris, in search of a wife; affectionate as well as sarcastic references to the pleasures of the body, into which can be read, if desired, allusions to gay partnerships, fill out Bogomolov's interest in bodily sensations which, following Rabelais, he declares to be without shame.

The Russian Case team made it possible for us to see his off-programme *Boris Godunov*, premiered in late 2014, and here, in Bogomolov's signature multi-spatial arrangement – made more complex by upper and lower levels separated off by several steps – was a tale of power and money. The latter is new to Pushkin's drama, but is entirely true to how power is fed and perpetuated in our time. Monitors at various eye levels projected mordant messages. Some commented on the stage action from the point of view of its critics (the picketers outside the Moscow Art Theatre were bound to have been in mind), while others hit back. Thus Pushkin's 'the people remained silent' (regarding Godunov's crimes) on one screen triggered off retaliation on another: 'the people are a herd'.

Elsewhere, an earnest spectator addressed the actor in the role of Boris by name, asking him how he could stoop so low as to perform in such a production. He was, in fact, a plant as well as an actor playing a plant. Such dia-

logical devices created polyphony between stage and audience in which the tricks of the theatre and the machinations of politics were targeted at one and the same time.

Theatrical means had very different dimensions in Viktor Ryzhakov's production of *Drunks* by the leading playwright, actor, and filmmaker Ivan Vyrypaev, winner of a Golden Mask for *Oxygen* at Teatr.doc in 2004 – Ryzhakov also directed it. As its title might suggest, Vyrypaev's text could lend itself to documentary-style neo-naturalism. Not so for Ryzhakov, whose actors in exaggerated costumes, excessive make-up, and grotesque hairdos, all from macabre-funny vampire scenarios, performed on a tilted black-and-white square podium that galvanized the hallucinatory effect of the whole.

Night passes as scene cuts into scene in a montage of indulgence in human excesses, which both author and director display without subtextual undertones of any kind – to the point where theatricality and the spectators' enjoyment of it prove to be the goal of the enterprise. The production's most arresting feature was its sustained contradiction between text-content and stylization.

The production most captivated by the sheer joy of creativity and the endless possi-



Above: the birth of Gargantua in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*: 'a baby cap on an aging actor' (photo: Sergey Petrov). Below: 'monitors at various eye levels projecting mordant messages' in *Boris Godunov* (photo: Aleksandr Sternin).

bilities of inventing was Yuri Butusov's *Three Sisters*, performed by the Lensoviet Theatre of St Petersburg. Butusov was the winner of the Golden Mask for best director. Only in his hands could Chekhov be so outlandish, so filled with startling images (like Andrey, suddenly in a wig, then with a clown nose, playing drum 'n' bass, or fiddling with a guitar instead of Chekhov's violin) and so driven by rapid changes from scene to scene (if the configuration can be called this). Dialogue was deconstructed, cut about, and shifted to provide the basis for Butusov's





From Viktor Ryzhakov's production of *Drunks* by the leading playwright, actor, and filmmaker Ivan Vyrypaev (photo: Yekaterina Tsvetkova).

collage of fragments, some of which seemed quite random until spectators could piece them together as the work progressed.

Tusenbach's speech in Act Two on how life will simply stay as it was 'a thousand years from now' kicks off the performance; Vershinin, untidy in an unbuttoned military jacket, soon joins him, out of sync with his entry according to Chekhov; Chekhov's opening scene of Act One, where the sisters talk of their father's funeral, was transferred to the beginning of Butusov's Act Three; 'To Moscow, to Moscow' was a refrain throughout, and was said – rather, tried out – as if in the repetition of rehearsals; and more of this kind until the performance ended with Irina calling out, again and again, her voice ringing, how she wants to live. By then it was clear that the entire production was constructed on études, that the études themselves *were* the production and not, as is usual in the Russian school ever since Stanislavsky, the medium for opening up actors and roles. Yet, very much within the purpose of études, these captured and as well revealed what is often half-concealed in Chekhov's themes of love, work, aspiration,

hope, how-to-be, and, above all, the urgency of wishing to live – and of living – as you wish to live.

Butusov's étude composition was also announced visually at the beginning by an unexpected picture, tableau-like in its stillness, of three club-glamorous women seated behind a table in a row, looking the worse for wear. One, with a gun cocked by her chin, could be none other than Masha, although all were in black – and *there* it was, a prank, right from the start. A clothes horse behind the women was jam-packed with costumes that the actors tried on, wore, and changed throughout the performance for two reasons: it strengthened the theme of how-to-be, put as a question, by how the characters used clothes, accessories, and other bits to see how they might live (Chebutykin, for instance, tried on a beard, and pounded drums); it was a source of jokes and gags about making theatre, which theatricalized the very process taking place, and of the sense of spontaneity and energy emanating from the stage.

These qualities – études, spontaneity, energy – particularly mark Butusov's work of the past few years. His 2012 *Macbeth*, the



Three Sisters, performed by the Lensoviet Theatre of St Petersburg, directed by Yury Butusov, winner of the Golden Mask for best director. 'Only in his hands could Chekhov be so outlandish, so filled with startling images' (photo: Yulia Kudryashova).



Flight at the Vakhtangov Theatre: 'a remarkable collage of études-fragments with a rock-concert streak' (photo: Aleksandra Turgushnikova).

Movie, in the genres of clip, cult, and blockbuster movies and rock concerts all rolled into one, was a full-on five hours with little dialogue straight from Shakespeare. (See, for Butusov's different approach to text, NTQ 116 on his 2010 *Measure for Measure* at the Gyula Shakespeare Festival.) *Flight*, too, after Mikhaïl Bulgakov's play, which Butusov premiered only in April 2015 (so not in the Golden Mask) at the Vakhtangov Theatre with Vakhtangov actors, was a remarkable collage of études-fragments with a rock-concert streak. Repeated manic running, one person after another, along a narrow space before the fire-curtain went up, was the foremost metaphor of the production. While it crystallized Bulgakov's subject matter more immediately visibly than did any one action-image in *Three Sisters*, the productions shed light on each other, as they do on one of Russia's most exciting directors today.

Finally, there was John Cage's *Lecture on Nothing*, directed by former Dodin student Dmitry Volkostrelou. This was in a white space, softly lit by small lamps on the floor,

within which two actors in an opaque, veiled booth read Cage's words as notes – a beautiful shamanic piece unlike other work of this rising star that I have seen, like prizewinning *Angry Girl* at the 2013 Golden Mask.

The Russian Case offered more than any of us could see. There were productions by well known figures: Kama Ginkas's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Dmitri Krymov's *O-H Late Love* (London saw his *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Opus 7* in 2014 at the Barbican), Sergey Zhenovach's *A Dead Man's Memoir* after Bulgakov, and Kiril Serebrennikov's adaptation of *Martyr* by Marius von Meyenburg, who is so closely associated with the Schaubühne in Berlin. Non-Russian dramatists and directors of Russian productions were represented, including Finnish playwright Juha Jokela's *Fundamentalists*, directed by Lera Surkova. The contemporary dance programme included a piece using *Moments* by celebrated playwright Mikhail Durnenkov, who is part of the new-drama wave growing apace since the beginning of this century.