

Thoughts Prompted by the Golden Mask Festival: Acclaimed Director Accused of Pornography

By [John Freedman](#)

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Marcelli and theater critic Olga Galakhova at the Fomenko Studio on Thursday. **John Freedman**

Yevgeny Marcelli is one of Russia's most distinctive directors. His unorthodox, thought-provoking productions created in Sovetsk, Kaliningrad and Omsk have frequently performed in Moscow at the [Chekhov International Theater Festival](#) and at the [Golden Mask](#). Marcelli was awarded a Golden Mask in 2006 for his powerful production of "Miss Julie" for the [Omsk Drama Theater](#).

This year [Marcelli](#), 51, is a member of the jury judging productions nominated in the categories of drama and puppetry. He is a modest, soft-spoken man prone to smiling when engaged in conversation. The last thing you'd expect to be discussing with him is his [troubles with the law](#).

"I don't really know what's going on," Marcelli told me Wednesday afternoon before a fun performance of "A Dog's Tale" by the [Karelia Puppet Theater](#) on the stage of the [Hermitage Theater](#). "A group called the People's Council or something is upset."

Marcelli smiled.

"It sort of ruins your mood," he added. And smiled again.

The [People's Council](#), through one of its wings called the Center for People's Defense, has made a formal complaint against Marcelli and the [Kaliningrad Regional Theater](#), where Marcelli is the artistic director. The reason? In his production of Maxim Gorky's "Summer Folk," which opened at the end of March, a male actor spends some time on stage in the buff, sometimes with his [back turned to the audience](#), sometimes [hiding behind an actress](#) in a flouncy skirt. In the eyes of the People's Council, an ultra-conservative organization with ties to the Orthodox Church, this constitutes pornography. The People's Council has gained notoriety by mounting attacks in Moscow on an exhibit called ["Banned Art-2006"](#) at the Andrei Sakharov Center, and on the "Apples Simultaneously Fall in Various Gardens" [exhibit at Winzavod](#).

According to [OpenSpace.ru](#) the accusers claimed the following: "Parents and their children who attended the theater for the premiere were shocked when, before their eyes, absolutely naked actors and actresses flashed before their eyes, imitating sexual acts and various sexual perversions."

OpenSpace also quotes Marcelli: "These parents probably don't watch television and probably have no mass media devices at home. In comparison to the information that surrounds any young person today, our production is quite gentle."

In the first few days following the accusation by the People's Council there were numerous reports about the incident on the internet. It goes without saying that the feeding frenzy is now in full swing. There are hundreds of "reports," most dripping with unsupported promises of details about scandals, sex, pornography, infamy, disgrace and any number of other juicy topics. One site, quoting the horror and embarrassment suffered by a mother and her child who were in attendance, posted numerous photos and a 70-second video of the [offending scene](#).

I commiserated with Marcelli about the fact this may bring him more attention than most of the beautiful, finely-tuned productions he has created since his debut in 1985.

"Yes, it does ruin your mood," he said again. And smiled.

"The show is basically a restaging of a production I did several years ago in Omsk," Marcelli continued. "It was nominated for a Golden Mask and it toured all over Europe. It never seemed to bother anyone before. I don't know what happened this time."

If I appear in any way to be making light of this event, let me restate my take. There is nothing funny about this attack on a thoughtful and conscientious artist. The case of the People's

Council against the Sakharov Center, for example, is still being [dragged through the courts](#) two years down the road.

I haven't seen the new staging in Kaliningrad, but I did see the Omsk production during the Golden Mask Festival in 2004. I thought it was an often funny, always challenging show that made Gorky look more contemporary than I may ever have seen him.

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