

Playwright Olga Mikhailova Turns Critic

By [John Freedman](#)

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I ran into [Olga Mikhailova](#) at a new show at the [Hermitage Theater](#) on Friday night. First, I couldn't help but notice her stunning red dress, which she explained she was wearing in honor of Easter week. But what really drew me to her is this: In addition to being a playwright who is one of the inspirations of the influential [Teatr.doc](#) and a screenwriter whose scripts have had particular success in France where most of them have been filmed, Olga is one of the finest conversationalists in Moscow. Quick-minded and sharp-tongued, Olga, as the Russians say, never has to rummage in her pocket to find something to say.

We got to talking and I was surprised and pleased to hear Olga say she has added a new line to her resumé: Not long ago she was asked by the editor of Passport magazine to begin contributing theater reviews. This is noteworthy for at least two reasons: 1) A print publication in our day and age of economic anemia actually hiring a critic rather than firing one; and 2) the role reversal: Imagine what it must be like for someone used to bearing the brunt of the critic's sting to have to go out and crack the whip herself.

So, after complimenting Olga on her fiery attire, I asked her to explain what it is like for her

to sit in judgment of her friends and colleagues. For those who don't speak Russian, here is an approximate rendering of Olga's thoughts in English:

"It's unnatural for a playwright to be a critic because you have to look at everything with a critical eye. As a playwright, however, you are used to seeing things in an ideal light. And then there's this: you want to root for your fellow playwrights. It's not right for a playwright to criticize another playwright. You can criticize theater, that's okay. But it's wrong to criticize your colleagues who don't have it easy as it is.

"New plays aren't staged often these days. It is no longer like it was in the past when almost all new plays had a chance to be staged and then to live or die on their merits. That process was interrupted 25 or 30 years ago. The situation today is unnatural. When you watch a production of a new play today you wonder: Is this a case of the theater ruining a playwright's work, or is it a case of the writer knuckling under to the demands of the theater?

"So you feel bad for the poor writer &mdash he's like a dog on a chain who is badly fed.

"And that is why I believe that playwrights should become critics."

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