

Maksym Kurochkin Cooks Up Great Drama

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For the longest time there was a cartoon strip taped to a wall in the offices of The Moscow Times. I think it was a clipping from "Dilbert," and it pictured a hapless geek cowering in front of an imperious nerd seated at a desk. The desk-sitter was indicated as barking at the wretched dweeb, "It has come to my attention that you have a life outside the office!"

Every time I saw that I would think, "Yikes! How did they find me out?"

I have no intention of revealing all my secrets, but I will share one today — my passion for translating Russian plays into English. Currently, while juggling all of my cherished Moscow Times duties (and meeting every deadline, I would like to remind those who might be interested), I am digging, scraping, flying, leaping and stumbling through one of the most complex and magnificent plays I have ever encountered: Maksym Kurochkin's "Kitchen."

"Kitchen" premiered nine years ago this month — on Nov. 17, 2000, in Kiev, Ukraine,

to be exact. It was a whole other era. Maybe two eras ago, if one goes by my little rule of thumb that things pretty much turn over with the passing of every five years. Nobody then knew who Kurochkin was, and nobody cared. He was a living playwright, and nobody in Russia worth their salt at the turn of the century gave a damn about a playwright who wasn't dead.

Then came "Kitchen," a weird, wild and wonderful force of nature that was commissioned by Oleg Menshikov, of all people — Russia's one and only true matinee idol. "Kitchen" was a monstrous hit, and suddenly new plays were the hot item in Russian theater.

Menshikov once told me how he and Kurochkin came together.

Oleg was looking for someone to write a play that would take place in a kitchen. That was the only stipulation — everything else was up to the playwright. Somebody told Oleg about an interesting guy who had written a really funny, five-minute play for an evening of one-acts called "Moscow — the Open City" at the Playwright and Director Center.

"So I called Maksym up and told him to bring in some of his work," Menshikov explained. "The next day this guy comes into my office and dumps an enormous pile of everything he's ever written on my desk."

Kurochkin has a remarkable flair for excess. It is his strength and it is his element. He is a master of chaos. It is one of the things that make him a quintessential Russian writer, even though he was born and bred in Ukraine. And so it happened: Russia's most popular and influential movie actor commissioned a play about a kitchen from an unknown, untested writer approaching his 30th birthday.

What Oleg got in return must have knocked his socks off. It is an enormous, sprawling play, in which heroes and heroines from the Middle High Germanic Nibelung saga morph into and out of the bodies of contemporary Russians, who are catering a wedding in a forlorn forest castle that is being besieged by Attila the Hun's half million-strong army while Beavis and Butthead give commentary over a television set.

Let's keep the historical record straight. This play, and Menshikov's production of it, were panned mercilessly in the press. Within days of its Moscow opening on Nov. 27, 2000, I counted 28 reviews that had appeared. Two were positive. (I didn't write a review on either side because my wife, Oksana Mysina, played the female lead and I don't review shows that she performs in.)

The other side of the facts is this: Among audiences, "Kitchen" was a monstrous "event," a cult happening unlike any I have seen in my 21 years of covering Russian theater. The hall at the Mossoviet Theater, where the show ran in Moscow, was packed to the rafters for every show. Enormous crowds of fans gathered in front of the theater beforehand hoping to get in and behind it afterwards to catch glimpses of the actors coming out.

Lidia Savchenko, who played the sharp-tongued cook Mama Valya, elicited whoops and hollers of delight every time she opened her mouth during the show. Gennady Galkin, who played a pushy, cynical, intellectual attorney that protected his own interests first, and then those of his clients, plunged the house into gut-splitting laughter with his first appearance and held them there until his last. People in the audience knew all of Menshikov's

lines, and you often could hear them whispering them in the hall during pauses before the actor would speak.

In short, audiences proved to be exponentially more sensitive and insightful than critics. "Kitchen," in fact, was — and still is — an extraordinary play about the brutal, complex world we live in. It posits a universe where people cannot go on until they remember the past, but where, paradoxically, once they have dredged the past up, they are trapped into committing the same old sins. In other words, one cannot live without memory, but memory is the first step leading to the destructive impulse for revenge. It is a horrible and true predicament, and "Kitchen" is a hilarious and powerful play.

"Kitchen" ran for just two years, and not because fan interest declined. On the contrary, people were shocked when Menshikov announced his decision to close the show. His reason was understandable for a man who wore the various hats of producer, director and star of the show. Menshikov believes in closing shows when they are at their peak, not waiting until they fall apart and make a mockery of their own legend.

Thus, to this day, just outside the entrance to the Mossoviet Theater you can find a "gravestone" commemorating the years of "Kitchen," among other shows produced by Menshikov's 814 Theatrical Association. (See photo above.) Menshikov's production of "Woe from Wit" ran from 1998 to 2000. "Kitchen" ran from 2000 to 2002.

I have long maintained publicly that "Kitchen" is untranslatable, while privately I have never ceased priming myself for the day when I would discover the courage to take on the task. That day came abruptly last week, and once I started I could not stop. I have been at work on the translation feverishly for six days, setting it aside — quite solemnly, I might add — only in those moments when my Moscow Times duties have called.

For me it has been an amazing return to a time I had not forgotten but rarely think about in detail. In the nine years since I first encountered it, "Kitchen" has not aged a whit. Perhaps that's because the world it was written about has not changed or gotten any better. Or perhaps it is because Kurochkin, challenged to write about some people fiddling around in a kitchen, rose to the occasion and created a monumental piece of dramatic literature about the times we live in and the worlds that inhabit us.

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