The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

'Playing Dead' in Baltimore

By John Freedman

March 15, 2010



Juanita Rockwell is an American writer and director with more than 25 years of experience creating new works for theater, opera, radio and other genres. She was the artistic director of Company One in Hartford, CT, the founding director of the MFA program in theater at Towson University near Baltimore, a writer-in-residence at the prestigious O'Neill Center in the United States and has had her work mounted in the United States, Egypt, Costa Rica and Hungary.

An encounter with one of the most iconic Russian plays of the last decade, however, brought something new into her life. Never before had she had the need to find so many ways to curse in English.

But that was not the defining factor in Rockwell's work on a translation of the Presnyakov brothers' dark comedy "Playing Dead."

The play, also known in English as "Playing the Victim," is a biting commentary on the state of Russian culture and civilization in the early 21st century. It dissects and provides insight into Russia's complex relationship with other cultures of the world, its contemporary youth culture and the notorious Russian mindset, which is better known as the famous "Russian soul."

All of that was primary in Rockwell's mind as she fashioned her new translation in the American idiom. But there is no denying it: She was also fascinated and challenged by the fact that, as she puts it, there are "79 different ways to say the 'F-word' in Russian."

Rockwell created her version of "Playing Dead" as part of an ongoing, three season-long program of contemporary Russian drama at the Towson University Department of Theater Arts. The play concluded a monthlong run on Sunday at the Single Carrot Theater in Baltimore. It was directed there by Russian director Yury Urnov, an artist-in-residence at Towson and Rockwell's partner in the translation process. Urnov provided Rockwell with a composite literal translation that included explanations of all the many variants and connotations each Russian phrase or word might have. Rockwell took that rich document and transformed it into a new American-English play.

One of the first decisions this process caused Rockwell to make was to give the play a new title in English. She argued that the literal translation of the Russian &mdash used in a previous translation done in England and in most English-language journalistic accounts of the play &mdash did not suit the spirit of the play or the intent of the authors. It was, she argued, not so much a play about victimization but rather a piece about a young man who seeks to discover something about himself by trying on states and circumstances that are associated with death.

I attended the final performance of "Playing Dead" in Baltimore and took part in a discussion about contemporary Russian theater afterwards. (A video of the discussion may be seen here). Shortly after that, I cornered Juanita backstage and asked her to talk a little about her work. To hear Juanita's story in her own words, click on the image below.

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