

Russian Drama in Middle America

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There was still one more week before Lev Dodin and his mighty Maly Drama Theater from St. Petersburg were to appear in Ann Arbor, MI, but there was already plenty of Russian drama going on in this city perched at the top of the American midwest.

Maksym Kurochkin, one of the most innovative Russian playwrights, was at the University of Michigan Residential College to attend readings and workshop productions of two of his plays — "The Schooling of Bento Bonchev" and "Kitchen." In fact, following a performance of "Kitchen" late last week, Kurochkin informed the director Katherine Mendeloff that this was only the second production of this play in any language. Following the legendary staging by Oleg Menshikov in Moscow in 2000, the play has not been performed since.

Kurochkin, Russian critic Yelena Kovalskaya and I were in Ann Arbor at Mendeloff's invitation to be a part of the events surrounding the rehearsals and performances of the two plays. But we also found the time to take in a few local sights while we were there.

So as Katherine and I sat down one afternoon in a remodeled old diner at the Henry Ford Museum just outside Detroit, I thought it was a fine opportunity to find out a little more about this director's connection to Russian theater.

Mendeloff has been directing professionally since graduating from the Yale School of Drama in 1980. She has long had an interest in the plays of Anton Chekhov, and in 2005 she staged a piece combining sections of "The Seagull" with excerpts from Tennessee Williams' "The Notebook of Trigorin," a rethinking of Chekhov's play. That played in Moscow at the Chekhov International Theater Festival.

In recent years, Mendeloff has devoted her time and energy primarily to "Shakespeare in the Arb," a summer series of productions that are mounted in Nichol's Arboretum in Ann Arbor.

But it was the director's interest in new work that brought her to Kurochkin. To hear more about that, click on the picture below.

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