

Theory Meets Practice at Towson University

By [John Freedman](#)

May 16, 2010

The  Moscow Times

Robyn Quick, a professor of dramaturgy in the Department of Theater Arts at Towson University near Baltimore, was introducing two Russian playwrights to a theater full of students. She had been teaching the works of these writers, Yuri Klavdiyev and Vyacheslav Durnenkov, in her classes for about three years.

For the writers, it was a step into the unknown. They had no idea what an impact their work had made.

For the students, it was a moment of reckoning. Theory was about to slam up against practice.

Professor Quick introduced the two playwrights in — sorry, this is no pun — quick succession. The name "Yuri Klavdiyev" was followed by an explosion of shattering, hot buttered applause punctuated by guttural shouts and shrieking yells. Lady Gaga couldn't have done half as well.

A moment later, the name "Vyacheslav Durnenkov" was followed by the same withering, enthusiastic eruption of rhythmic sound.

I was on stage to help translate for the writers, and I swear that heat poured down on us from the raked rows of black seats rising up in front of us.

Klavdiyev, Durnenkov, I and about 100 American theater professionals were at Towson University from May 7 to May 9 for "New Russian Drama: Translation/Production/Conference (2007-2010)," a 3-day event hosted by Towson and Philip Arnoult's Center for International Theater Development.

The purpose of the conference was to wrap up an entire Russian season at Towson, during which 10 plays by six important Russian writers were staged as full productions, workshops or readings, and to present highlights of the season's results to an audience of American producers, writers, directors and critics. The writers and I kicked off the conference with a preliminary event at the Martin E. Segal Theater Center in New York, about which you can read more here. (<http://blog.mestc.gc.cuny.edu/blogs/>)

Now, this is all impressive and important. And I have a feeling that we will now see numerous Russian projects taking place in locales as diverse as San Francisco, Austin, Washington and several other cities in between.

But one of the strongest impressions I took away from Towson were the looks on the faces of the students as they engaged the writers whose plays they had studied, and the looks on the faces of the writers as they were confronted by the love and respect of readers, spectators and artists they had never before imagined to exist.

Many of the students also worked on the productions as actors, stagehands, lighting engineers and in other capacities. Their immersion into the worlds of the various works had been profound.

Durnenkov admitted that he had no idea that young Americans could possibly be interested in the characters and plot complications he had created in "Frozen in Time (Exhibits)," a play about the convulsions a small Russian town experiences when two businessmen attempt to turn it into a living museum.

Klavdiyev bonded with the students over tastes in music and movies. He admitted that, like Quentin Tarantino, he was educated in a video salon, something that was quite evident in the fast-paced, shoot-'em-up, hilarious and harrowing production of his play "Martial Arts."

Following the performances of each production, the writers went backstage to greet the student casts and crews. There were some marvelous, memorable moments that reminded everyone present of the power of cultural diplomacy.

In fact, after I returned to Moscow I received a letter from Professor Quick, who wrote, "The students had the kind of amazing, mind-expanding experience we hoped to give them. They are still aglow with what many of them have called something they will remember for the rest of their lives."

To see what Dr. Quick had in mind, browse through the gallery of photos above.

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