

Developing Plays for Russia and America at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center

By [John Freedman](#)

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Eugene O'Neill is one of those American writers whom Russians accept as if he were one of their own. Whether it's his Irish passion or his grand American scale, O'Neill somehow spoke the same language that Russian theater speaks.

It should come as no surprise, then, that an American theater center founded in O'Neill's honor has long been involved in bridging the culture gap between Russia and the United States. In fact, according to Preston Whiteway, the executive director at the [Eugene O'Neill Theater Center](#) in Waterford, Connecticut, his organization was alone in maintaining contacts with Moscow during the freeze in relations that President Jimmy Carter imposed on the Soviet Union following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

I was at the O'Neill on Sunday to attend the reading of a play by Russian playwright Yaroslava Pulinovich, and I came away having learned plenty. To keep this all on the up-and-up, let me disclose: the translation of Pulinovich's "Natasha's Dream" was mine.

After the reading, a very strong one by Mattie Hawkinson, I cornered Preston at the entrance to the Rose Barn Theater where the reading had been held before a packed house. I asked him to tell me in some detail about the O'Neill's Russian connection.

As I learned, the Center's founder, George C. White, took a trip to Russia and found that he was fascinated by Russian theater and culture in general. Thus began a series of exchanges, programs and tours that over the years have brought such Russian writers as Alexander Gelman and Nikolai Kolyada to the United States to work on plays and translations of their plays into English.

In fact, O'Neill's method of using readings to help writers find the strong and weak points in their work had a major impact on the way new plays are now developed in Russia. Several Russian writers who visited Waterford in the 1980s brought back the knowledge and experience they gained and began employing it in their own playwriting laboratories.

One of the first places where this happened was at Shelykovo, in the Kostroma region, northeast of Moscow. Just as the O'Neill Center is based on the former estate belonging to Eugene O'Neill, Shelykovo was a theater center established in the former estate of the great Russian playwright Alexander Ostrovsky. Here George C. White helped the Russians set up a play development laboratory that incorporated the lessons that had been learned at the O'Neill.

To hear more of what Preston Whiteway had to say, click on the picture below.

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