The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

# Russian Answers to American Theatre's Questions

By John Freedman

September 27, 2010


American Theatre magazine has come up with a clever ploy to keep people interested in what it is up to in between issues. Every few days they post a question on their Facebook page and encourage their fans, of which there are 7,874 at this writing, to respond. I have not done so because my experience in Moscow is hardly comparable, and it would not mean much, to the magazine's general readership.

On the other hand I have been itching to get in and have my say on a few topics.

So here they are ◙ my answers to a few questions posed by American Theatre over the past weeks.

**Do you practice the "10-block rule," which says you shouldn't discuss what you thought**

**of a play until you're 10 blocks from the theater, lest someone involved or related overhear you?**

I practice the get-home-alone-and-safe rule. Not because I don't want anyone to overhear what I have to say, but because the instant that I walk out of a show, I don't know yet what I want or need or even have to say.

This is an extremely intimate moment for me. For another hour at least, I remain in a state of open confusion and am highly receptive to anything ⊠ any word that I hear, any glance that I see or offer myself. If someone says anything to me, or if I let myself formulate thoughts that are not yet clear, I find that this becomes a roadblock when I sit down to write.

I once attended the theater with Hedy Weiss, the theater critic of the Chicago Sun-Times. Hedy is a garrulous, friendly, bubbly person. Just as the lights began to dim, she turned to me and said, "Don't think anything of this, but when the show ends I will bolt out of here. I will not say good-bye, and don't say anything to me."

I loved her for that, and I think of her every time someone runs up to me after a show and asks me breathlessly, "So! What did you think!?" At those moments, if looks could kill....

**"Somebody once said that when you're making theatre, your goal should either be to make people laugh so hard they wet themselves or cry so hard they can't speak &mdash but either way you end up with water." From director Art Manke, in the new Denver Center Theatre program, talking about his production of "The 39 Steps."**

It's a nice image ⊠ reducing an audience to a puddle. I like it and I agree. A "dry" audience is one that hasn't been touched. What's the point of inviting people into your theater if you aren't going to reach out and touch ⊠ and pinch and punch and tickle ⊠ a little?

**Who does the theater belong to?**

A difficult question. And answers will be very different in different cultures. In Russia I would say theater belongs to whoever is bold enough to seize it. After all, this is the way in Russia, a country that loves a strong hand. I hadn't thought of that connection before, but I think it's legitimate. As regards theater here, it can belong to the producer, if he or she is determined to wield control. It can belong to the director, as it often has over the last century. It can belong to the actor, as it did in the 19th century and, to some extent, does again in the present day. (Oleg Tabakov at the Moscow Art Theater, for instance, has turned that art house into a showcase for popular actors.) In some respects, it can belong to the audience.

**Has a play ever profoundly changed your mind about something?**

About politics? No. About morality? No. About aesthetics? Yes. My own opinion of my life? Yes.

**Have you ever run into a critic who gave you a bad review? Paint the scene for us.**

I have to turn this question around, of course, since there are people I have criticized who must run into me from time to time. But what sticks in memory is something slightly

different. Here is the scene: I am working at my computer. The phone rings. I wince. I always wince when I am working and the phone rings. I answer the phone, because I always answer the phone, even when I am working. I hear an unknown voice asking to speak to me. I identify myself and the person says, "I just read your review of my latest show and I want to thank you."

But this isn't the story yet.

The story is this: These are directors whose work I have criticized, sometimes severely. The first time it happened I was flabbergasted. The second time I was curious. The third time it happened I began to realize there was something to it. A critic can disagree with a director, even strongly, but there is a way of disagreeing with respect and understanding. It's quite surprising what happens if you succeed in doing that.

**Have you ever enjoyed a play more upon later reflection than when you were watching it?**

I don't know if "enjoy" is the proper word, but I certainly see a play better in the first few hours after watching a performance. Theater is a living art, in which live people on a stage seek to affect live people sitting in a hall. The impact of that act cannot possibly cease to have its effect once the curtain closes. You take a show out the door with you and you take it home to bed with you that night. The better the show is, the more it refuses to leave you alone.

**"Criticism begins not in knowledge but in ignorance. You can't prepare for a new ballet, a new dancer, a new play, a new work of music, a new trend. Expertise won't help you with the new; but an open mind will." What do you think?**

This was a fairly controversial statement, as it turned out. But I strongly agree with it. I think the worst critics are those who are loaded down with knowledge and all of the rules about how things should and should not be done. It is a critic's job, in my opinion, to wipe the slate clean ⊠ to the extent that that's possible ⊠ when you walk in the theater's front door. Every work of art deserves to be perceived and understood on its own terms. You can't do that when you walk into the theater loaded down with the terms of everyone else who has come before. When you find yourself sitting in the hall comparing what you are seeing to what you have read, witnessed, heard ⊠ or, at least, when you let those impressions take control of what you are watching in the real moment ⊠ you are already losing contact with the work at hand.

**Comedy is a form of truth-telling, not a diversion from weighty matters of the day. Discuss. What part were you born to play?**

That is surely what comedy would be in a more perfect world. Although that's not why I'm answering this question. I just want to say to any directors out there that I am your King Lear. You can reach me through this newspaper.

**Stillness speaks louder than movement onstage. True or false? Discuss.**

Let's put it this way: Less is quite often more. One of the most powerful performances I have seen in recent seasons was Alexander Porokhovshchikov playing the old father in Biljana

Srbljanovic's "Locusts" at the Pushkin Theater in 2008. For the most part, the actor sat motionless, expressionless and wordless in a chair, the incarnation of a riddle with a ghastly outcome. But he was the center of the whole performance. I heard later that the director, Roman Kozak, had offered the actor any of the roles in the play he wanted. Porokhovshchikov chose this one because, reportedly, he knew that it could be the most expressive of them all. It was.

### Can scenic design make or break a show?

Boy, can it ever! I have seen shows utterly buried under the hubris of a designer. The first that comes to mind is Mikhail Mokeyev's production of Heinrich von Kleist's "The Prince of Homburg" at the Et Cetera Theater in 1998. Yury Kharikov, no matter how famous and how award-laden he was, simply buried this show under the most extravagant, irritating and anti-theatrical costumes I may ever have seen. I walked out of the theater and I had no idea what had happened there. All I could recall were costumes that bounced and ruffled and rustled and bloomed so aggressively that the actors ceased to exist.

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