

15 Plays That Made the Decade

By [John Freedman](#)

January 10, 2011

The Moscow Times

Every list, much like every law, is made to be argued, bent, broken, violated and tossed aside. And since I'm as argumentative as the next guy, here's my contribution to some verbal altercations right here at the beginning of the new year.

I put together a list of the top 15 Russian plays — and I'm talking about play texts here — that made their appearance in the first decade of the century.

Why not 10? Because there were too many to narrow down the list to that number.

Why not 20? Because there weren't enough.

You're beginning to get the picture of how I go about these things. I'm not good at sticking to rules and regulations, especially when I'm the one who establishes them in the first place.

In short, one play below came out too early to be included in the list ("Kitchen" premiered in late November 2000, that is, at the tail end of the last decade), but it's here because what

are a few weeks? And maybe, just maybe, it's the granddaddy of every other play in this list.

Another play, "The Tale of an Upright Man," wasn't really a play. It was a performance instigated by a highly provocative director. But read on to see why I included it.

In a couple of other cases, I couldn't narrow my choice to a single play, so I squeezed in several under a single title.

So here they are: 15 texts in chronological order, some of them popular, some obscure, some ignored by critics, others praised to the heavens. Each of these texts helps define the theater world as I saw it over the last decade.

"Kitchen" (2000) &mdash Maksym Kurochkin. This colossal, provocative, experimental, daunting, poetic, smart-aleck, wise, funny, powerful and astonishingly tightly built play opened the door to the 21st century. It was lambasted by the critics (within three days of the premiere I had read 28 reviews; 26 of them panned or mocked the play) and loved by the public (directed by and starring Oleg Menshikov, the show packed 1,000-seat halls until Menshikov closed the show at the peak of its popularity in 2002). All that aside, this was a masterwork for a new era, a compelling and paradoxical exploration of memory, history, justice and eternal conflict. Mark my words: 100 years from now people will still be saying similar things about this play &mdash that is, if there are people left on the planet, and if they have the time and ability to make theater.

"Plasticene" (2001) &mdash Vasily Sigarev. This is the play that gave the so-called "new drama" its flavor and tone. Violent and uncouth, it captured the fancy of a generation brought up on large doses of cynicism and tiny droplets of hope. The story of a teenage boy enduring bullying, ridicule, rape and love struck a chord. Sigarev, a graduate of the Nikolai Kolyada school of writing in Yekaterinburg, brought immediacy and grit to his words and characters. The production at the Playwright and Director Center was inventive and slick and launched the career of director Kirill Serebrennikov.

"Oblom Off" (2002) &mdash Mikhail Ugarov. "Oblom Off," based on Ivan Goncharov's 19th-century novel "Oblomov," was an unlikely hero. Ugarov had written it several years before this for Oleg Yefremov at the Moscow Art Theater. But Yefremov's death in 2001 put an end to that project. Ugarov, who had never directed before, stepped in and mounted the play himself at the Playwright and Director Center. The result, characterized by understatement and irony, was hugely popular and helped established Ugarov as a major talent.

"Oxygen" (2002) &mdash Ivan Vyrypayev. This was the first important play to come out of the brand-new Teatr.doc, which was founded, incidentally, by Ugarov and his wife Yelena Gremina. Vyrypayev an actor from Siberia, presented this simple two-actor play in the grungy basement at Teatr.doc and found fame. It immediately tipped off Vyrypayev's style of writing texts that are basically monologues broken into dialogues. His use of the Bible &mdash the story of "Oxygen" was based loosely on the Ten Commandments &mdash was something that he would return to in other plays.

"The Moth" (2002) &mdash Pyotr Gladilin. This excellent play about a young male recruit turning into a woman overnight in order to be excused from combat training is one of the sleeping gems from the last decade. It was a play of and for its time, as the war

in Chechnya was continuing in Russia and the United States was cranking up a war in Iraq. At that time nobody, not even the most progressive of Russia's progressives, was speaking out about the military and war in modern society. Could that be why "The Moth" never got the attention it deserved? Whatever the case, Yevgeny Kamenkovich's production at the Fomenko Studio packed in audiences for eight years. It only closed last spring when its lead actor Yuri Stepanov was tragically killed in a car accident.

"Playing the Victim" (2003) &mdash Presnyakov brothers. "Kitchen" had shown that a challenging new play could be a commercial success, but it was not until Kirill Serebrennikov staged "Playing the Victim" on the small stage of the Moscow Art Theater that the "new drama" infiltrated the world of the established theaters. The Presnyakovs, college professors in Yekaterinburg, wrote this hip, kitschy and disturbing play about a jaded young man who is caught between the past of his father and his own aimless future. "Playing the Victim" was picked up in many countries throughout the world, establishing the Presnyakovs for awhile as the leading Russian playwrights internationally.

"The Cultural Layer" (2003) &mdash Vyacheslav and Mikhail Durnenkov. This play about the space of an apartment bringing together former, current and future inhabitants was not a big hit. An effective production was mounted in the authors' home city of Tolyatti and was shown at various festivals. A later production done at the Moscow Art Theater under the title of "The Last Day of Summer" was a travesty. And yet, this work had enough impact that the city of Tolyatti was recognized, at least for awhile, as a hotbed of new plays. The Durnenkov brothers, together and apart, have continued to write plays that have had success in Russia and abroad.

"Tale of an Upright Man" (2004) &mdash Ksenia Velikolug. This play was not "written" by Ksenia Velikolug. It was imagined and created by director Boris Yukhananov at the School of Dramatic Art. But Yukhananov turned much of this inventive production over to Velikolug, who as a result of cerebral palsy is limited in her ability to move and speak. She sat in her wheelchair on stage and, with the aid of her computer and a video system projecting text and images on three screens, composed much of the play's text in real time. Her commentary about the actors, the play that was unfolding, the nature of Yukhananov's work and its connection to history through the work of Antonin Artaud and others was nothing short of brilliant.

"Flying" (2005) &mdash Olga Mukhina. Here is a play still waiting to have its proper impact. But that time will come. Mukhina herself staged it in 2005, although for reasons incomprehensible to me, the critics and the theater community ignored the event completely. Yevgeny Kamenkovich staged a fine student production a year or two later and a successful production was mounted in Magnitogorsk in 2009. But this, in fact, should have been an important event. It was the first work by this major writer after an eight-year silence, and it was the first play in Russia to deal directly with the young, hip, "office" generation created by the so-called stability ushered in by then-President Vladimir Putin. Using glamour, beauty and fashion as guideposts, the play reveals the dangers of having too much money, power and influence when you don't know what to do with any of them. As a disclosure of potential conflict of interest and as proof that I am willing to put my money, my labor and my reputation where my mouth is, the American premiere of this play in my translation will open at the Breaking String Theater in Austin, Texas, on Jan. 28.

"Generation Jeans" (2005) &mdash Nikolai Khalezin. This play about the denim and rock'n'roll culture in the late Soviet period has had little presence in Moscow or Russia in general, although it has been performed here on tour on occasion. But this production of the Free Theater of Minsk &mdash the same theater that frequently runs afoul of authorities in Belarus, as it did again in December &mdash has been one of the most popular Russian-language works performed in the West. Google it sometime and look at the celebrities who have seen it and praised it &mdash Mick Jagger, Vaclav Havel, Tom Stoppard and Harold Pinter among them.

"I Am the Machine Gunner" (2006) &mdash Yury Klavdiyev. Like the Durnenkov brothers, Klavdiyev is a product of the industrial city of Tolyatti. His plays are tough, violent and poetic. I have a feeling that he is in the process of emerging as one of the top two or three Russian writers working today. But his plays, which are influenced by old Hollywood westerns, Japanese anime and Chinese martial arts movies, are still ahead of most directors brave enough to tackle him. One play that has now had two brilliant productions done in Moscow is "Machine Gunner." Irina Keruchenko's production at the Playwright and Director Center and Vladimir Pankov's vastly different production this fall for his SounDrama Studio are signs that this play is a classic in the making.

"The Little Match Girl" (2006) &mdash Klim. This one almost has me stumped, because how can I choose this specific play over "The Active Side of Eternity," "I, She, Not I and I," "Cafe Buchenwald" or any number of other texts by this unique director-turned-writer? "Match Girl" is a fascinating work based loosely on the Hans Christian Andersen tale. But what it really does, like most of Klim's plays, is explore the complexities, the animosities, the disillusionment and the love that come with a life in the theater. All of these plays have been staged by St. Petersburg director Alexei Yankovsky and most have been performed in Moscow on tour. "Match Girl" was as memorable as any of them.

"Panties" (2007) &mdash Pavel Pryazhko. Here is another toss-up. Pryazhko, hailing from Minsk, has emerged as one of the most respected playwrights today. Others might single out "Life is Grand" (2009) or "The Field" (2010) as his pinnacle. I lean towards "Panties" because it was the first to reach Moscow and because I love the way Pryazhko mixes hyper-contemporary nonchalance with nods to classical Greek tragedy. The story of a woman willing to die to find out who stole her panties off the laundry line is absurdly silly and moving at the same time.

"Natasha's Dream" (2009) &mdash Yaroslava Pulinovich. Still another resident of Yekaterinburg and another graduate of the Nikolai Kolyada school, Pulinovich burst on the scene less than two years ago with this short monologue for a young actress. It tells the story of a teenage orphan girl who, we realize only in the final moments, is in court for attacking a woman and we, the audience members, are the jury that must pass judgment on her. This is a play that presents a writer of great potential. But already, even this small work has acquired an international reputation.

"One Hour Eighteen" (2010) &mdash Yelena Gremina. This is as much a political declaration as it is a play. Gremina collected statements drawn from interviews and the media concerning the case of Sergei Magnitsky, a lawyer who was investigating corruption and who was himself arrested for corruption and allowed to die in a Moscow prison before he was charged with

a crime. So scandalous was the event that President Dmitry Medvedev opened an inquiry into how this ailing prisoner could have been allowed to die without proper treatment. (Just two months ago, however, detectives in the Magnitsky case were honored with official awards from the Ministry of Internal Affairs.) "One Hour Eighteen," which plays at Teatr.doc, tells the story of people who were witnesses to, or accomplices in, Magnitsky's death. In a way that no one has done in my 22 years in Russia, this play puts politics, current affairs and theater art on a single plane and leaves it up to the audience to draw its own conclusions.

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