

15 Productions to Remember, 2001-2010

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Sergei Zhenovach's production of "The Potudan River" told a tale of love not overcoming obstacles.

Photo courtesy of the Studio of Theater Art

You think it's too late for one more New Year's list? Then you don't live in Russia, like I do.

We just celebrated Old New Year on Friday. This is the New Year that would have been if the Soviet government had not decided to join the same calendar as the rest of the world in 1918. It's the New Year that the Russian Orthodox Church continues to observe to this day.

In short, the New Year's tree is still up. My friends and colleagues are only now just coming out of hibernation. And I'm making a new list to join the one I put together last week of the 15 new plays I consider the most important of the last decade.

Today we're talking directors and their productions. And this one is much harder. I'm already in conflict with myself, wondering why I picked "this" and not "that."

A few rules and explanations. Unlike last week's play list, this list of productions concerns only Moscow. By and large I did not include new plays in this list – they got their due last week. I did not include single directors multiple times, thus leaving out some masterful shows that were more accomplished than some I did include.

But my point in this list is less to create a primer to perfection, which doesn't exist anyway, than it is to create a picture of a decade.

Plasticene (2001) directed by Kirill Serebrennikov at the Playwright and Director Center. First on my list and I'm already violating my rule excluding contemporary plays. But this production of Vasily Sigarev's tale of a young man pitted against the world was epoch-defining. It is the play that kicked off the term "new drama" in earnest, served as the Moscow debut for a major new director, and solidified the position of a theater as the most forward-looking of the new century.

Rain After the Deluge (2001) directed by Tonino Guerra and created by Ilya Epelbaum at the Ten Theater. This was the second entry in Epelbaum's ambitious project named the Lilikan Museum of Theatrical Ideas – 15-minute productions created by some of the most famous people in the theater world. Before the talk about global warming really heated up, Guerra, the great screenwriter for Fellini, Antonioni and Tarkovsky, imagined an entire planet deluged beneath the waves of a marauding sea. Epelbaum, using his usual tools of smoke, mirrors, glue, glass, gauze and shadows, gave Guerra's idea extraordinary expression in the tiny confines of the Lilikan Theater – a little box of maybe three square meters.

Polyphony of the World (2001) composed by Alexander Bakshi and directed by Kama Ginkas for the Chekhov International Theater Festival. This astonishing work of music and theater remains one of the single greatest productions I have ever witnessed. It told the story of the birth of the universe, segueing into the maturation and death of a single man. It played just twice, in part because it proved too difficult to bring the enormous international cast of 100 together again. Ginkas continued to hit gold throughout the decade with such stunning productions as "The Lady With the Lapdog" and "Rothschild's Fiddle" at the Theater Yunogo Zritelya, but I can only describe "Polyphony of the World" with the word "masterpiece." That goes for the director and the composer.

Academy of Laughter (2001) directed by Roman Kozak at the Pushkin Theater. This funny, fast-paced play by Japanese author Koki Mitani hit like a display of fireworks when it opened. Kozak had just taken over the moribund Pushkin Theater and he showed he was not going to give in to widely shared superstitions that the theater was jinxed. "Academy of Laughter" was a critical and popular success and, indeed, it revived the theater almost instantly, bringing in audiences and critics who had forgotten the path to this theater years ago.

The School of Fools (2003) directed by Nikolai Roshchin for the ARTO Theater and the Meyerhold Center. Imagine a huge three meter-high schooner "floating" up to the front row in a theater and then suddenly a wild crowd of characters escaping from below deck as if straight from the paintings of Breughel and Bosch. That was just the first few minutes of this amazing three-hour extravaganza that was a challenging mix of physical, musical, poetic and even puppet and shadow theater. I'm not sure anybody really knew what this show was about – there were hints that it contained a kind of Faust-Mephistopheles narrative line – although

“meaning” wasn’t the meaning of this thrilling, provocative and unforgettable piece of theater. Experiencing the unknown and the unexpected was.

Richard III (2004) directed by Yury Butusov at the Satirikon Theater. Butusov staged several brilliant shows at the Satirikon over the last decade, and actor Konstantin Raikin put on numerous great performances. But if I flinch and ignore their collaboration on “King Lear,” this comic-book version of the bloody Shakespearean tragedy was the most memorable of all.

The Tale of an Upright Man (2004) directed by Boris Yukhananov for the Laboratory of Angelic Directing and the School of Dramatic Art. This was pure theatrical magic. Yukhananov combined dance, philosophy, video art, an author composing texts onstage in real time, children’s toys and a bit of Stanislavskian realism to create a show that I have always had difficulty describing and have not been able to forget. This beautiful, inspiring work about – what? – about an artist being true to himself, continues to inspire me today even though the show has not been performed for years.

Three Sisters (2004) directed by Pyotr Fomenko for the Fomenko Studio. There is very little that is joyous in this, Anton Chekhov’s play about smart and sensitive people whose lives are extinguished amidst the tedium of everyday life. But Fomenko brought to it a sense of regal, high tragedy that I don’t believe I had ever seen in it.

The Stone Guest, Or Don Juan is Dead (2006) directed by Anatoly Vasilyev at the School of Dramatic Art. This show was staged just as the official campaign to oust Vasilyev from the theater he founded was getting underway. And he put everything that he was experiencing into this powerful, visually stunning work based, in part, on a short play by Alexander Pushkin. As I predicted would happen in my review at the time, Vasilyev did lose the battle with the city fathers who wanted him gone. But art is greater than politics. Some of those city fathers – former Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov, for instance – are now gone, but I still remember Vasilyev’s “Stone Guest” as though it played last night.

I Am the Machine Gunner (2007) directed by Irina Keruchenko for the Playwright and Director Center. This play was hardly more than a year old when Keruchenko, a graduate of Kama Ginkas’s directing class at the Moscow Art Theater, unveiled her stunning production. It not only established Keruchenko as a hot new director, it raised the status of this play that has now become something of a modern classic.

Gogol Evenings: Part I (2007) directed by Vladimir Pankov for the SounDrama Studio. Pankov is a prolific director and composer and I can imagine a couple of his productions being in this list. But for me it was this, the first in a trilogy of Gogol prose adaptations that worked with astonishing precision, clarity and vision. The integral, organic way that Pankov weaves drama and music together was perfect for this folkloric tale of love, mystery, magic and mayhem set in old Ukraine.

Carmen: The Outcome (2007) directed by Andrii Zholdak for the Theater of Nations. This director from Ukraine came to Moscow once every few years throughout the last decade and set theatrical houses on fire. I have loved all of his iconoclastic shows – including “Phaedra: Golden Braid” and “Moscow: Psycho,” but I thought “Carmen” was the piece de resistance. Using rock music, several screens projecting images of live video feed, and numerous stage platforms positioned in various places around the large stage, this sweeping tale of a woman

scorned took no prisoners. For added fun, I happened to attend the premiere at which dozens of spectators stomped out demonstratively, angry that they had not received what they expected when they bought tickets. Personally, there are few things I love more in theater than when a director tosses things at me I don't expect. I think that's the epitome of great art.

The Marriage (2007) directed by Mark Zakharov at the Lenkom Theater. In an age of throwaway commercial theater featuring casts of stars to haul in audiences, no matter how grizzly the production on stage, this version of "The Marriage" was nothing less than heroic. It starred almost all the great actors at the star-heavy Lenkom – including the great Oleg Yankovsky in his final role – and it was just crushingly good. I rather imagine this is what theater was like in the 19th century, when the acting was so superb you didn't even need a director. That is no slight on Zakharov – on the contrary, because his work here was to make it look like the actors just got together to goof off and have fun. And he did it brilliantly.

Opus No. 7 (2008) directed by Dmitry Krymov at the School of Dramatic Art. This director probably defined theatrical experiment better than any other in the second half of the decade. In shows like "Auction," "The Demon: The View from Above," "The Cow" and "Tararabumbia" he constantly found new ways to put together the same old ingredients theater has been using for millennia – well, at least centuries. But it was "Opus No. 7," incorporating music by Alexander Bakshi and Dmitry Shostakovich to tell tales of tyranny and survival, that stripped the top of my head off as I watched it.

The River Potudan (2009) directed by Sergei Zhenovach at the Studio of Theater Art. Ask others in Moscow and you'll probably get five or six different answers as to Zhenovach's best production at his relatively new theater. But this is the one that, for me, brought his style and sensibility together like no other. This show about a young man and woman who loved each other but had no idea what to do with that love was delicate, tender and bluntly honest at every turn.

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