

Finding Words for the Death of Anna Yablonskaya

By [John Freedman](#)

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Anna Yablonskaya receiving an award at the Eurasia play contest in Yekaterinburg.

My wife clarified for me this morning why I have not been able to sit down and write about the death of playwright Anna Yablonskaya on Monday in the terrorist attack at Domodedovo Airport.

“The form cannot possibly fit the content,” she said dryly but with perfect accuracy.

Nothing can adequately be said about a person — one of 35 — walking out of an airport and being killed by the shrapnel flying through the air from a bomb that happened to be detonated at that very moment.

The randomness of it, the pointlessness, the horror, the crime, the heartache — none of it can be captured in words of any kind. All attempts to do justice to the grief and confusion in words are doomed to fail.

And yet words, especially in the world inhabited by a playwright, come in floods.

The outpouring of pain and outrage has been enormous in the Moscow theater community since the news that Anna Mashutina, whose pen name was Yablonskaya, was among the victims.

Critics, playwrights, actors from all over the world have been exchanging thoughts and memories by email, on social networks and in the press.

In an [article](#) published on the website of the Guardian, English translator Sasha Dugdale wrote that Yablonskaya never took her success for granted: “She was a humble person who curled up when praised by the audiences at her readings, and seemed almost embarrassed by her reception in Moscow. Unlike other writers, she never moved there — she was too firmly rooted in her native Odessa, and she took inspiration from the people and the language around her.”

Writing in a separate [piece](#) in the Guardian, journalist and playwright Natalia Antonova described Yablonskaya as a “very modern playwright — she wrote about family life, love and sex. Never the type to try to shock her audience, her writing was very subtle, feminist but not overtly political. She just happened to write about women's lives a lot.”

Pavel Rudnev, one of Moscow's most influential critics, [wrote](#) in his LiveJournal of Yablonskaya's place in what he calls a strong women's element in Russian drama today. “This is a very harsh, unsentimental aspect and Anya was its inspiration, a leader of this branch.”

Rudnev also noted that Yablonskaya, for the time being, had been more fortunate with prizes than productions. And yet, two of her plays were staged in St. Petersburg, another was staged at the Praktika Theater in Moscow, and there were plans for more.

Two benefit performances of her play “Somewhere and Nearby” will [take place](#) at Praktika on Feb. 12 at 8 and 10 p.m.

The author of approximately a dozen plays, Yablonskaya began writing for the theater in 2004. Her works won awards and garnered fans in festivals and competitions in Minsk, Yekaterinburg, St. Petersburg, Moscow and other cities.

She arrived in Moscow from her home in Odessa, Ukraine, in the afternoon on Jan. 24 to receive an award from the prestigious Iskusstvo Kino (Art of Cinema) journal for “Pagans,” a film script she created from her own play. “Pagans” was read with huge success at the Lyubimovka young play festival in Moscow in September.

I missed that reading, one of the more than 40 held in a six-day period, but I heard the same thing from many who did attend: It was the best play at the festival.

A week or two later I received a call from Andrei Moskvina, a colleague in Minsk. Moskvina often travels to Moscow for theater festivals, and he closely follows developments here in the artistic world. When he learned that I had missed the reading of “Pagans,” he subjected me to a vigorous round of criticism.

“I think Yablonskaya is the best of all the new writers,” he declared with conviction.

On Facebook, playwright Olga Mukhina remembered seeing a reading of one of Yablonskaya's plays read at the Volodin Festival in St. Petersburg last year. In a separate entry, Mukhina wrote simply: "Anya Yablonskaya. Thus does tragedy acquire a face ..."

Also on Facebook, Yekaterinburg playwright Alexandra Chichkanova posted a [gallery](#) of photos taken when Yablonskaya was in the city to receive an award in the Eurasia play contest.

Many have pointed out one of those inexplicable coincidences that we who have the luxury of hindsight tend to invest with mystical significance.

On Dec. 21, Yablonskaya wrote a single line on her blog: "It seems to me that I have very little time left."

This enigmatic declaration is referred to in the [blog](#) of Russian journalist Ksenia Larina, [The World](#) radio program produced in the United States and Canada by the BBC and WGBH, and in Ellen Barry's [article](#) in The New York Times.

Yablonskaya often published her poetry on her [blog](#), and her last entry, made on Jan. 21, was a poem. Under the circumstances, the imagery is striking to say the least. The translation that follows was done by Viktor Klimenko, a translator at the Moscow bureau of The New York Times. The text, which I altered some and gave punctuation for clarity in English, was kindly made available to me by Ellen Barry with Klimenko's permission.

And so, finally, in Yablonskaya's own words, we find words that are capable of standing up to her senseless, untimely death.

*Rain and other phenomena of chemistry and nature —
You look at these things and think that everything will change.
You hope that rain will act like hydrogen peroxide —
You wash the wound with rain and wait until the wound foams up.
You demand to see some signs from tree and sky,
You count the number of cats slipped out beneath the gate,
The squawks of cuckoos and gulls; meanwhile the grass grows under your feet.
You decide surely tomorrow, if not even maybe today ...
Bookkeeping has drowned in chaos, grief and contradictions ...
The same signs always mean different things
Regularities are an illusion. Rain falls incessantly.
There will be some holiday soon. Holidays must be celebrated.*

Anna Mashutina, born 1981, died 2011, is survived by her husband Artyom and her three-year-old daughter Maria.

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