

The New Intertwining of Russian and American Theater

By [John Freedman](#)

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It is impossible for me to write on the topic of contacts between Russian and American theater artists without stepping into dangerous territory for a journalist.

So let me clarify right off the bat: This is not a journalistic piece, but rather one individual's — even one advocate's — take on a trend that clearly is gathering steam.

I have played a role in some of the events mentioned in the following piece. But what I find encouraging is that, increasingly, I hear about projects that others are undertaking.

One development that is unprecedented in the 22 years I have lived in Moscow is the active support for a broad range of cultural initiatives coming out of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow.

Under the umbrella of the Bilateral Presidential Commission, a plan for the funding of cultural events in Russia that came into being after a meeting between Barack Obama and Dmitry

Medvedev in 2009, a vast array of initiatives, exchanges, partnerships and tours were put into motion. The range of disciplines affected by the program is impressive indeed — jazz, dance, film, theater and fine art are all included.

Some are particularly near and dear to my heart.

As I grew up in the American southwest, I was exposed to the work of the Russian-born artist Nikolai Fechin, whose studies of Native Americans are among the finest ever done. An exhibit of Fechin's work will bring his American-period works to Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kazan at the end of 2011.

Of all the embassy-related events, I most eagerly await summer performances of the irrepressible Buckwheat Zydeco. This great New Orleans band will appear in June in St. Petersburg and at the Usadba jazz festival outside of Moscow.

But it is primarily theater and drama that I have in my sights, and there is plenty of that to talk about.

I am presently working with Michael J. Hurley, the Minister Counselor for Public Affairs at the U.S. Embassy, on an initiative called [New American Plays for Russia](#). Together with Philip Arnoult's Center for International Theatre Development in Baltimore, we are linking up seven major contemporary American playwrights with prominent Russian playwrights and translators who will render important new American plays into stage-worthy Russian.

By the end of 2011 we will complete not only the translations, but a series of mini-festivals of readings in at least eight Russian cities. This will be a great opportunity to introduce Russian theaters and audiences to the work of Suzan-Lori Parks, Eric Bogosian, Adam Rapp, Chuck Mee, Deborah Zoe Laufer, Annie Baker and Nilo Cruz.

This is just one of numerous theater projects being supported by the embassy, however.

With the embassy's help, New York's Lark Play Development Center has embarked on a long-term project that founder John Eisner told me last summer would give American and Russian writers the opportunity to develop deep personal and creative relationships.

The Lark has already taken several steps to further that end. In November the theater hosted playwright Yelena Gremina and critic Yelena Kovalskaya as observers of their working process, while in December playwright Maksym Kurochkin and American translator John Hanlon participated in the Lark's annual writer's retreat. While there, Kurochkin and Hanlon began work on a jointly-written, multi-cultural play.

On Thursday this week the prominent Russian director Yevgeny Kamenkovich travels to the United States with a group of ten Russian acting students from Moscow's Russian Theater Academy to work at the [California Institute of the Arts](#) in Los Angeles. They will commence rehearsals on a dual-language production that will cast student actors from Russia and the United States. Ten students from CalArts will travel to Moscow in June 2011 to complete the project and hold performances.

In October 2010, the renowned avant-garde American director Lee Breuer spent six weeks in Saratov at the Saratov Youth Theater as he staged a production of Sam Shepard's iconic

"The Curse of the Starving Class." There are unconfirmed plans for Breuer to return to Saratov for a project that would take place in 2012 during an entire year of embassy-supported events to be called American Seasons in Russia.

I am told that these and many other events will be posted on the U.S. Embassy Moscow Facebook [page](#) in the near future.

Numerous private and independent projects are also taking place in both the United States and Russia. Some are supported by such traditional organizations as the New York-based Trust for Mutual Understanding or CEC Artslink, while others have been organized with local support.

Graham Schmidt, working through his own Breaking String Theater in collaboration with the prominent Rude Mechanicals theater troupe, hosted a mini-festival of Russian drama in Austin, Texas at the end of January. A run of his production of Olga Mukhina's play "Flying" continues through Saturday.

As part of the sweeping Soviet Arts Project, the University of Chicago hosted readings of plays by Maksym Kurochkin and Yury Klavdiyev in mid-January.

The Baltimore-based Generous Company toured its production of Klavdiyev's "I Am the Machine Gunner" for several months at the end of 2010. Talk is underway to revive the tour in Seattle, New York and Edinburgh, Scotland.

David M. White, the founder of Generous Company, is also the director of a new play laboratory called WordBRIDGE. In 2009 and 2010 WordBRIDGE hosted Russian translator Maria Nikolayeva and playwright Kurochkin, respectively, for various summer projects. It will also partner with the Playwright and Director Center in Moscow in March to present a program of readings of new American plays. According to Georg Genoux, the program's curator, this will kick off an entire year of American drama at the Playwright and Director Center.

The Eugene O'Neill Theater Center was one of the first American organizations ever to set up long-term relationships with Russian theater artists back in the 1970s and '80s, although by the 1990s those contacts had run dry. Now, however, the center has revived its collaboration with Russia by sending students to study at the Moscow Art Theater school, and by hosting the highly-touted young Russian playwright Yaroslava Pulinovich for a summer internship last year.

In the spring of 2009, Princeton University hosted playwrights Alexander Arkhipov, Mikhail Durnenkov, Alexander Rodionov and Kseniya Stepanycheva, who, among other things, conducted a master class on documentary drama as it is practiced in Russia. The following year in the spring of 2010 the University of Michigan's Residential College hosted Maksym Kurochkin for workshops and performances of his plays "Kitchen" and "The Schooling of Bento Bonchev."

Double Edge Theater in Massachusetts has taken a somewhat different tack from other American organizations by digging back into the past for its Russian-related material.

An experimental laboratory that slowly develops productions over a period of years, Double Edge is currently working on a project called the Chagall cycle that draws its inspiration from the paintings of Russian-French artist Marc Chagall. Last summer the theater mounted a production based on the Russian fairy-tale "The Firebird" and it is currently collaborating with Russian actors, choreographers, composers and singers as it cultivates the Chagall cycle further.

The Yale Drama School, arguably the most prestigious theater school in the United States, hosted young Russian playwrights and directors in December for an exchange of ideas. Among those spending time at Yale were director Marat Gatalov and playwright Nina Belenitskaya. They returned to Moscow with plans to organize a long-term program of exchanges between Yale and Moscow's Playwright and Director Center that would allow emerging writers and directors in both countries to share work and experience.

[New York's Studio Six](#) is a theater founded in 2005 by American actors who studied at the Moscow Art Theater. They invariably work with Russian drama and in the coming season they expect to mount a joint dual-culture project with Vladimir Pankov of Moscow's innovative SounDrama Studio. According to Executive Director Robert Olinger, the as-yet unnamed project is scheduled to open in July.

The vast majority of Russian theater artists making working visits to the United States in recent years have found their way to the Martin E. Segal Theater Center at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. In just the last two years, the Segal Center presented evenings featuring playwrights Olga Mukhina, Maksym Kurochkin, Yury Klavdiyev, Vyacheslav Durnenkov and the directors Kama Ginkas and Dmitry Krymov.

Several projects mentioned above grew out of a major program that ran between 2007 and 2010 at Towson University near Baltimore. [New Russian Drama: Voices in a Shifting Age](#) was a joint project mounted by the Theater Arts Department at Towson and the Center for International Theater Development which, with my participation, presented ten new Russian plays by six contemporary writers in new American idiom translations.

One of many events that continue to spin off of this project is a planned summer tour of Stephen Nunns' Towson production of Yaroslava Pulinovich's "The Natasha Plays" to the Charlestown Working Theater in Boston and the Mabou Mines ToRoNaDa Space at P.S. 122 in New York.

And I don't doubt that I am missing plenty more. As crowded as the field of Russian-U.S. theater collaborations already is, I have a sneaking suspicion that we soon will be seeing much more.

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