

Martin Luther King, Jr., Plays to a Russian Audience

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March 20, 2011



John Eisner, Katori Hall and Tatyana Khaikina listen to comments from spectators after a reading of Hall's "The Mountaintop" in Moscow on Friday.

American playwright Katori Hall's "The Mountaintop," a fictional depiction of the last hours of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life, has not yet made it to New York, but it was given a reading in Moscow on Friday.

A packed house at the Open Stage Project listened intently as Satirikon Theater actors Grigory Siyatvinda and Yelizaveta Martinez Cardenas read the parts of King and a mysterious female figure named Camae. She appears first as a hotel maid and finally as an angel sent from God.

The reading was organized by the New Play Festival, currently underway as an adjunct of the Golden Mask Festival, in collaboration with the Lark Play Development Center in New York. The Lark has developed Hall's work in the past and, according to the organization's producing director John Eisner, it has the goal of bringing international recognition to other writers it

works with.

"The Mountaintop" won the Olivier Best New Play award in London one year ago, and is slated to open this fall on Broadway, where, according to some reports, Samuel L. Jackson may take on the role of King.

The Moscow reading sparked a lively discussion with members of the audience, many of whom were playwrights themselves.

"What interests me is that this play is about an American giant, an American myth," said Yelena Gremina, whose latest play "One Hour Eighteen" continues to stir controversy at Teatr.doc. "This is a play about a difficult journey, about hard choices," she added.

Responding to suggestions that some of the play's details are unfamiliar or even impenetrable for Russian audiences, playwright Maksym Kurochkin said, "It bothers me when people want everything to be understandable, as if the point were to make everything clear for children."

Yelena Kovalskaya, an organizer of the New Play Festival, suggested that the reading was "our opportunity to discover America. We know America only by films, which are misleading. We know by our own experience with new plays, that drama reflects the realities of a culture better than film."

Hall provoked a burst of laughter when answering a question about why God and an angel in her play are black females.

"Because I'm black!" she quipped. "But I can articulate that thought a little better, too. I wanted to turn around the usual perceptions of God as an old, long-haired, blue-eyed man."

Translator Tatyana Khaikina told Eisner in a private chat after the event that she has hopes for "The Mountaintop" to be produced at the Satirikon Theater. The theater's artistic director Konstantin Raikin has been looking for a play that would suit his two actors of color, she said.

Under Raikin's direction, both Siyatvinda and Cardenas have obliterated the color line, playing traditional Russian roles.

After the reading I caught up with Michael J. Hurley, the Minister Counselor for Public Affairs at the United States embassy in Moscow. The embassy has supported the work of the Lark in Moscow, as it has many other projects that will be Moscow-bound over the next two years.

Click on the video below to watch Hurley discuss plans for the American Season in Russia and other events.

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