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A Critic Pays His Dues

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I am the last person you would expect to see on a stage. Unless I'm holding a baseball bat I haven't the vaguest notion what to do with my hands. (And at this point in my life, I hardly remember what to do with a bat anymore.) My memory is awful. Audiences scare the hell out of me — they make me think of sleeping lions in a snake pit. Bright lights make me sweat.

I have joked with Kama Ginkas that if he ever decides to stage "King Lear," I am his man. But if he ever takes me up on the offer I'm going to run off to the Canary Islands where he'll never find me.

Still, if you write about theater in Russia, expect to spend some time on stage.

I was reminded of that three days ago at one of the first performances of "The Elevator Hater" at the National Youth Theater. It's basically a one-man show performed by Alexei Blokhin — but one-actor shows are dangerous. Those actors get lonely up there. They need a little true blood to keep their own juices flowing.

I suspected I was in trouble when Blokhin asked the guy sitting next to me if he would mind coming up on stage. The man sunk back into his seat as if he were water. He just disappeared. Blokhin turned to me.

Well, you don't say no in these situations. You accept your fate. God and an actor have chosen you, and so you get up quickly. With a smile. A spring in your step. You give a look around as if this is your calling in life and there is nothing you would rather be doing. You turn a bold, but generous gaze on the actor because you know you have to do this. You can't be a spoil sport. You can't be a party pooper. You can't be a – well, you can't be a coward. That's not good for the reputation and it's not good for the soul.

So I put myself in Blokhin's hands, as I have put myself in the hands of numerous actors and actresses over the years. Performers who, for Lord-knows-what-reason, have chosen me out of a crowd to make me a guinea pig. Because they needed a chump.

And who's going to play a chump better than a critic?

At "The Elevator Hater" I played the man who has nothing to say to his neighbor while riding up to his apartment on the sixth floor. The sixth floor. That was my contribution to the show. Blokhin asked me what floor I live on. I told him the sixth. I don't know why. It sounded good.

I noticed beads of sweat building up on Blokhin's controlled, smiling face. I felt better. Sweat was beginning to drip down my cheeks.

On our imaginary trip up to the sixth floor Blokhin jingled his keys in front of me, as if silently daring me to take them. He smiled. I bit. I lunged. He yanked them away. He laughed as I grabbed at the air. The audience laughed. I did too. It's what you do in these situations.

I've been in better situations.

Nelli Uvarova married me once. This was also at the National Youth Theater shortly before Nelli became a monstrous television star. It was in a show called "The Rules of Behavior in Contemporary Society." She called me up onstage, took my hand, and led me to the altar. She married me on the spot and then kicked me out. She called up another man to be her lover.

You see how quickly good can turn to bad in the theater? Just like in life.

One night I was sitting in what I thought was a perfectly safe spot. I was about fourth or fifth row center in the big hall of the Satire Theater. Who's going to care about me that far from the stage?

Well, as fate would have it — Mikhail Derzhavin did. He needed someone to play the role of the Commodore's steps in a brief excerpt from "Don Juan." He turned to the audience and began to hunt. It never occurred to me I was in danger. The hall there holds 1217 spectators. Pretty good odds.

But no. Derzhavin's gaze swoops around until it settles on me.

"Stand up!" he barked.

Thinking nothing, but feeling my heart sink into my feet, I stood.

"Stomp your feet," he barked.

I stomped.

"What's wrong with you? Can't you stomp LOUDER!" he snapped.

Laughter. Lots of it.

I stomped louder. There I was again, sacrificing myself for the good of art.

At Dmitry Krymov's new production of "Katya, Sonya, Polya, Galya, Vera, Olya, Tanya" for the School of Dramatic Art, an actor lights a fuse that burns right under the seat of a spectator in the front row before, with wind machines, cellophane and orange lighting, the theater blows up.

Yes, you got it right. It was under my seat that the explosion happened. As the fuse burned towards me a spectator who knew me whispered loudly, "John! Put it out!" But I didn't. I lifted my feet and I let it burn. I let the theater be blown to smithereens. I think the director wanted it that way.

Not every instance that I have been enlisted into action has been bloody or humiliating.

During a performance of Woody Allen's "God" at the Mossoviet Theater, a female character went into hysterics. Nobody in the play gave a damn. But she was in bad need of some consoling so she turned around and headed for the audience. She came directly to me with a swift step and, with a soft hand and pleading eyes, asked me if I would just give her a hug.

Hey. Whatever it takes to keep the machine of art moving on.

At a marvelous student performance called "Stairs Up a Tree" I was pulled forward by four tantalizing, but disembodied female hands protruding out of a curtain and made to sit there while they caressed my palms and tickled my fingers.

During a performance of a show called "Eugene Onegin...Pushkin" many years ago, actress Galina Kashkovskaya, playing the role of Tatyana, chose to pour her aching, loving heart out to me and only me. Her eyes locked into mine and the words of love flowed. She asked nothing of me but my heart and in the name of art I could give her nothing less than she asked.

These are dangerous moments for a married man, and particularly for a man who is married to an actress.

But my wife Oksana and I have had our moments too. Way, way back, it would seem when the planet was still young, my soon-to-be wife performed in a show called "Personals!" at what then was known as the Spartacus Square Theater. There was a scene in this musical and improvisational show when the actors would invite spectators up on stage to dance with them.

Whenever I attended, as I often did, Oksana would begin the scene by dancing with strangers.

But she always saved the last dance for me.

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