

Provocateur Kama Ginkas at 70

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Kama Ginkas was 47 years old when I first saw one of his productions.

That may be an odd way of doing the math, but as I sat and sipped apple juice at an enormous 70th birthday bash for Ginkas last Saturday at the Theater Yunogo Zritelya, I realized it gave me the right to say that my life in Russia has been a life lived with Kama Ginkas. I have lived in Moscow for 23 years. I saw my first Kama Ginkas show — a stunning dramatization of Fyodor Dostoevsky's "Notes from Underground" — 23 years ago.

And although this piece today is only tangentially about me, bear with me while I set up a few more personal signposts.

I next saw a Ginkas show in 1991 — this was "We Play 'Crime,'" a devastating, absolutely unforgettable work based on Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment" that posited a Finnish Swede speaking Swedish amidst the Russian-speaking cast in the iconic role of Raskolnikov, the philosophical murderer and rebel against God. That night my wife Oksana Mysina and I squeezed into the show without tickets — we somehow got onto a guest list. Ginkas's wife

Genrietta Yanovskaya, who did not know us from Adam or Eve, and who is the artistic director at the Theater Yunogo Zritelya, personally seated us front row center. We then sat enthralled for the next three and a half hours while Marcus Groth astonished us as Raskolnikov and Viktor Gvozditsky mesmerized us as Raskolnikov's nemesis, the detective Porfiry Petrovich.

I wrote about this show in October 1991 for the Moscow Guardian, the predecessor to The Moscow Times. For some reason I felt I needed a few words from the director to fill out the report and so I got hold of his phone number and called. I don't know who it was or why, but someone had warned me that Ginkas could be curt and/or difficult. I was apprehensive. What I found when Ginkas answered the phone was a man who was busy — he was packing to leave for St. Petersburg — and extremely accessible and personable. He answered my silly questions with thought, care, wisdom and humor. When he finished saying what needed to be said, he excused himself, explaining he had a train to catch.

I remember hanging up the phone and thinking, "My goodness, what a cool man."

Shortly after that I happened to be at the American ambassador's house for a dinner honoring an American poet and by a quirk of seating arrangements Oksana and I were seated next to Mr. Ginkas and his wife Genrietta Yanovskaya. This was the first time we met.

As fate would have it, the next time I crossed paths with Kama was in 1994 when, out of the blue, my wife ended up rehearsing and performing in what was to become one of the director's most famous shows — "K.I. from 'Crime,'" a one-woman performance that focuses on the single character of the widow Katerina Ivanovna Marmeladova in "Crime and Punishment."

Let me do a rough fast-forward from here — Kama and I wrote a book together ("Provoking Theater"), which was published in 2003; I created the English supertitles for his production of "Rothschild's Fiddle," which had its world premiere at the Yale Repertory Theater in 2004; I helped him write a chapter for a book published in English this year that was written by those, like Kama, who survived the Kaunas ghetto during the Nazi occupation of Lithuania ("Smuggled in Potato Sacks: Fifty Stories of the Hidden Children of the Kaunas Ghetto"); my wife over the years has traveled to 14 countries on 20 tours performing "K.I. from 'Crime,'" and I have tagged along on a few of them.

I pile all this information up for one reason and one reason only: to say that I know of what I speak when I declare that Kama Ginkas is one of the most extraordinary individuals I have ever encountered.

Ginkas is a man who always and invariably resembles himself.

This is no easy task. Maybe it was made a bit easier for him because he should have died or disappeared several times in his life. He should have died in the Kaunas ghetto when the Nazis systematically killed off the elderly and the young, but he did not. He should have been driven out of theater between 1967 and 1982 when he rarely could work as a director because his artistic sensibility did not fit the demands of Soviet art.

The sense that Ginkas was marked for extinction — and privileged (because he did not die or

disappear) — may have fed and developed his famous natural sense of defiance and obstinacy. Or maybe it was the influence of a demanding, but loving, father and a loving, but tenacious, mother. That is for Freudians to decipher. I do not know the reasons why.

What I know is that Ginkas is a man of supreme truth. This means he is unwaveringly true to himself and true to his calling. It means he is a man of great courage.

It also means he is quite capable of irritating and angering people both with his shows and his behavior.

Ginkas does not brook nonsense in life or art. Some have mistaken that for arrogance over the decades. Thus, that warning I received in 1991 that he might be difficult to talk to.

Others have considered it offensive. Thus the famous Moscow actress who walked out of the birthday bash over the weekend just as it was beginning. Spectators were led through the inspired and overwhelming chaos of the theater's workshop, so as to enter the theater through a place where the dirty work of creating art begins. This actress reportedly saw all that uncut wood, metal piled on metal, chips on the floor and said, "Oh, this is too Ginkas for me!" and left.

In one of his shows Ginkas had an actor talking at high speed while stuffing his mouth with bread. The damp crumbs flew out of his mouth all over the stage. In another he has an actress invite the audience to follow her into another room and, only when they finally get up to go with her, she slams the door in their faces. In still another he dumps a cartload of bloodied body parts ripped from mannequins down a stairwell, so that they come to rest at the feet of those in the front row.

The world that Ginkas reflects and conjures in his art is tough, unflinching and utterly unsentimental. Not every spectator is ready to pick up the gauntlet that Ginkas repeatedly throws down.

I have heard Ginkas say many times in many different situations that one of his primary tasks as a director is to force his spectators out of their ruts when they attend his shows. If they are laughing, he wants to make them cry. If they are crying, he wants to make them laugh.

Ginkas wants to *make something happen* to you when you witness his shows. He wants to change your state of mind and being, if only just slightly and if only for a brief, fleeting moment. He wants to alter your thoughts, your feelings. Whatever it is you have brought to his show today, he wants to push, cajole and, if necessary, shock you into leaving the theater in a slightly different state.

Maybe it would be more exact to say that Ginkas wants you to walk out of the theater with the odd sensation that, just a few minutes ago, something in you changed in some small, but tangible way, before everything snapped back to normal. As if to say, "I'm walking out of the theater now, I am myself again. But *something* was different back there before I got up to leave the theater."

That nagging thought that buzzes in the spectator's head like a warring bee is the essence of Kama Ginkas's art. Ginkas has no patience for complacency, for idleness, for laziness

in action or thought. He is an artist of change. Everything about him is about taking what we see, hear, know, think and feel, and making something else of it. Of changing it and transforming it into something more profound, more meaningful, closer to the truth and to the bone.

This is not the time to go deeply into this topic, but I cannot fail to state briefly that Ginkas in many ways can be seen as the prototype of what is generally called the "new drama" movement in Russian theater today.

I can hear the howls. Some of the ideologues of "new drama" — a contemporary, upstart strain of Russian dramatic art that strives to be provocative, challenging and ruthlessly honest — have even held Ginkas up as an example of the status quo, against which rebellion must be mounted.

Those are probably necessary, though petty, concerns. The reality of the fact is that Ginkas is the original upstart, the original provocateur, the original rebel, the original flame-thrower. Before he appeared tentatively as a young director in the late 1960s and then re-emerged in a huge way in the late 1980s and early 1990s, no Russian theater artist, probably since the time of Meyerhold, had been as brash, as demanding, and as calculatedly impertinent as Ginkas in his art.

Kama Ginkas is one of those great artists — and I use "great" in its proper and original form — who is utterly impossible to embrace, define or understand fully. He is a force of nature and, in the confines of a theater, he commands the forces of nature with exceptional skill.

Every attempt to wrap this man and his art in a neat package is doomed to fail. It cannot be done. I know. I have often tried and have failed so often that I now am accustomed, if not resigned, to the failure. It is a bitter and sweet sensation. I rue my inadequacy and I celebrate the extraordinary riches of Kama Ginkas's life and art.

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