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Are Russians and Americans Really the Same?

By John Freedman

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Poet Vera Polozkova and playwright Nina Belenitskaya read George Brant's "Clipped" at An Evening of Short American Plays on Thursday at Arte FAQ cafe.

I have lived in Moscow for nearly 23 years and I have heard this comment so many times my head hurts: "Russians and Americans are identical," "We Russians and you Americans are exactly alike."

I don't believe it for a minute. But I continue to hear it.

I most recently heard it at an evening of readings of short American plays in Russian translation. The event, which was called just that — "An Evening of Short American Plays" — was organized by Georg Genoux of the Joseph Beuys Theater in Moscow. It was held downstairs on Thursday in the club at the ArteFAQ café.

I had a hand in it too, because the plays came to Georg's attention through me. I occasionally

collaborate with the WordBRIDGE Playwrights Laboratory in the United States, and it seemed to me that the people at WordBRIDGE and the people at Joseph Beuys had something in common.

After a bit of vetting, the plays that I delivered to Georg were the following: Erik Ramsay's "Traction"; K. Frithjof Peterson's "Gun Metal Blue Bar"; John Walch's "Aisle 17B"; George Brant's "Clipped"; Samuel Brett Williams' "Missed Connections"; David M. White's "Enough." Each is a dramatic sketch that takes roughly 10 minutes to read. Perfect for an hour's evening of entertainment.

That's when the surprises began for me. Yury Muravitsky, the director to whom Georg entrusted the work on the readings, told me a month or so ago that he was knocked out by the plays. Very funny, very clear, he said.

Very clear? Very funny? Okay, the old geezer dying in "Enough" might be like old geezers dying in many places in the world, but the lunatics in "Traction" who appear to see religion in the notion of the tire gripping the road? The sadistic middle-aged farmer snapping pigeons' necks to keep the flock pure in "Gun Metal Blue Bar?"

I was taken aback. Even after living in Russia for 23 years I still never tell jokes in Russian. Never. Ever. And when I do, they fail. Period. The Russian "anecdote" and the American "joke" — well, they're like American jello and Russian jellied meat, if you know what I mean. If you don't, trust me: Russians barf at the former and Americans barf at the latter.

But I'm digressing.

After the readings on Thursday, and after my wife put on a blistering blitz concert of Russian-American rock and roll with her band Oxy Rocks, I went stalking. I was curious to find out what people thought. I was encouraged by the fact that approximately 120 people had crammed into a space that supposedly holds 85. I was encouraged by the fact that the SRO audience listened intently and often laughed when you might expect it. I was buoyed by the fact that, following the final reading, the place burst into – as the official Kremlin chroniclers used to put it — an "intense, sustained ovation."

Yeah, but maybe they were just being polite. I wanted real answers from real people — not just a mass response from an unpredictable crowd.

I sidled up to Varvara Nazarova. She's a fabulous young actress, performs in several of Dmitry Krymov's productions at the School of Dramatic Art. She's talented, smart, young and hip. She'll give me the real dope.

"Amazing," she said with a big grin lighting up her face. "Astonishing how you Americans are just like us Russians!"

"You sure about that?" I asked, skeptical.

"Oh, yeah!" she said. "You've got that same, like, boldness and, uh, arrogance."

"Well," I muttered inconclusively. "But there's more..."

"I think it must be that we are both used to being big empires," she went on. "We're powerful. We like power. And we've got space, lots of it. We're used to being able to throw our elbows around."

"Okay, yeah, I've heard that, but I'm not sure that's enough to..."

"No, no. It's true! You Americans are just like us!"

Hmm. Another tack, another person.

I asked a stranger about the translations. What sounded rough? Was there anything that sounded un-Russian in the texts?

"Excellent translations," she said.

Now, this is the perfect place to note that the translations — indeed, very good — were done by Yekaterina Raikova, Lera Kudryavtseva and Oksana Alyoshina. But, really? No flaws?

"Surely there were some words or phrases, that stuck out wrong?" I pressed ahead in my mission for the truth.

"Nothing. They all had a perfect flow as if they were written in Russian. Very funny."

I moved on to Yelena Kostyukovich. She is the literary director at the Saratov Youth Theater. She oversees annual new play festivals in Saratov, so she'll definitely tell me the truth.

"Those were fabulous plays," she said, her eyes shining happily. "It's like they were Russian. Their sense of humor is exactly like ours."

"Yeah, Lena," I said, "But..."

"Oh, yes," she cut me off. "Very funny, very acerbic on the surface, and devastatingly tragic underneath."

There's a Russian phrase that sort of goes, "Don't leave behind good to go in search of good." I'm a big fan of Russian wisdom. What else could I do then, but believe what people were telling me?

Now, I know: You doubters are going to say they were just being polite.

But, aha! Gotcha! That's Americans who are "just polite!" When have you ever seen a Russian "just be polite?"

So. I'm still a doubter myself. And I still will never eat my mother-in-law's jellied meat, which is considered her absolute specialty among the family. I'm an American. I don't do that.

But maybe Russian and American dramatists are closer than I thought. That might be a topic to explore some day.

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