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Remembering "The Polyphony of the World" Ten Years Later

By John Freedman

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It was 10 years and one week ago that I attended one of the most stunning pieces of theater I have ever witnessed.

The ticket stub I still have in my archive says May 19, but I was also present at the premiere of "The Polyphony of the World" on May 18. I almost never see shows a second time — my schedule, my nerves and my energy reserves don't allow it.

But I attended both performances of "Polyphony" during the Third International Theater Olympics in Moscow in 2001, and if it had played five times I would have been there five times. If the producer, Valery Shadrin, had had the wisdom to put this cosmic piece of theater into repertory, I might have quit my job and become a professional spectator — just attending this one show over and over again.

If it had gone on world tours I might have thrown everything up and chased it around

the world. Forget how I would have paid for that. I just can't imagine the thought of this show playing anywhere without me there to see it.

I know this for a fact because I did not see the single dress rehearsal on May 17 and it still galls me. My mother-in-law was there for that and she came out of the theater as if she had seen a ghost. She stared into space and said, "I can't believe what I have just seen. I don't know what that was. I think I just saw my entire life, the entire life of the planet, pass before my eyes."

After the second show on the 19th, my wife and I staggered out of the Vakhtangov Theater, where the event took place, and we ran into some friends immediately on the Arbat. They were noisy and happy and were talking a blue streak. Oksana and I could not bear the cacophony of it. We looked at them blankly, turned our backs and began walking.

We just walked. And walked. All I remember is that we originally headed in the opposite direction from our friends, that is, towards the Sadovoye Koltso. But where we ended up going; when we arrived wherever it was we were headed; and how and when we arrived home again, I'll probably never know.

We talked about Alexander Bakshi, the composer who conceived and created "The Polyphony of the World." We talked about Kama Ginkas, who directed it with fury and subtlety. We talked about Sergei Barkhin, who designed the magnificent set of primordial cliffs and valleys. We talked about Gidon Kremer, who exquisitely played not only his violin, but one of the heroes of the story in which the world comes into being when the first sound is made.

"The Polyphony of the World" had a cast of something like 100. There were shamans from Siberia, musicians from Australia, drummers from France and a tuba player — Jonathan Sass — from the United States.

There was a ballerina, Valeria Vasilyeva, who danced in total silence with a top hat burning on her head. To this day I can close my eyes and hear the extraordinary sounds of her tutu swishing in the air, her ballet slippers thumping on the stage and the sounds of her breathing heavily as she shattered the silence by spinning and spinning and spinning.

And there was a tenor from the Bolshoi Theater, Nikolai Semyonov, who stood in the top balcony behind the spectators and majestically sang the words "Orfei," or Orpheus, over and over again without musical accompaniment. This was, for all intents and purposes, the only word uttered for the duration of the performance.

Bakshi in his composition made me hear more new sounds — and old sounds in new ways — than I probably have ever heard at one time before or since. I heard the disconcerting rumbling, stomping sounds of a string ensemble as they marched across the stage playing their violins. I heard the rustling of the clothes of the musicians in Les Percussions de Strasbourg as they stood next to me in the aisle and prepared to unleash a percussive barrage. I heard a stone tossed into a huge vessel of water that not only had an unbelievably resonant "plunk," but tossed up a quick and gorgeous cascade of water drops like you usually only see in time-lapsed film on the Discovery Channel.

Describing "The Polyphony of the World" is rather like giving a summary of "War and Peace."

It's, uh, about war, and, um, it's about peace. In fact, describing "Polyphony" is even much harder than that.

For the program, Bakshi wrote a beautiful explication of what he was up to when writing this work. His often poetic essay ends with the following words: "The plot of this Mystery is based on a notion that is common to all peoples — sound is born of the air and is bound up in the notion of Spirit. Sound is the invisible link between man and Heaven. [...] People do not have the necessary common words to converse on this topic. However, the Sound around them and the Heaven above them are the same for all."

Ginkas also wrote a few characteristically pungent phrases. Here is how he began his program note: "'The Polyphony of the World" is not a concert, although it involves dozens of musicians. It is not an opera, although it features a singer from the Bolshoi Theater, and it is not a ballet although it features a ballet dancer. Nor is it a drama despite the participation of the AKHE art performance group and a Greek actor who once studied under Grotowski. Nevertheless, it is a work of theater because there is action in it."

The critics in 2001 did what critics are famous for. They missed the point. They missed the boat.

Basically, they ignored "The Polyphony of the World." One prominent young scribe sitting in front of me fell asleep. She kept dropping her pen every time she nodded off and then she would jerk to and go fishing around on the floor for it. Two others sat and chatted amongst themselves much of the 90 minutes it took for this miracle of theater to unfold.

I'm not being catty here — I'm telling you one of the reasons why you may never have heard of this brilliant theatrical creation. There were a few people there not doing their job those two nights.

The fact of the matter is that "The Polyphony of the World" was unlike anything that had been done in theater or music. It wasn't something that could be crammed into pre-existing categories. The ready labels wouldn't fit it, and they still don't.

There is one word, however, that fits it like a tailored glove — masterpiece. "The Polyphony of the World" was, and still is, a masterpiece of theatrical invention.

For the tenth anniversary of the two performances — the only two ever held — Russia's Culture channel ran a one-hour film of the production. It was a revelation — again — to see what the makers of this production had wrought.

We can be grateful that modern technology preserved "The Polyphony of the World" for those who are willing and able to appreciate its prodigious accomplishments and its moving appeal to receptive minds, hearts and senses. It is luckier than "Victory Over the Sun," the legendary futurist opera that in 1913 also performed only twice. Not only are the visuals of "Victory" lost in the sands of time, the original musical score is also lost.

"Polyphony," however, is there for us to hear and see. It's on film, although to be sure, that's not the "real thing." But unless someone can convince Shadrin to do what he failed to do 10 years ago — keep this amazing work of art alive — this is all we are going to have. And,

fortunately, that is no small thing. YouTube harbors several excerpts from the televised film. One features the Kremerata Baltica ensemble marching as they play; another focuses primarily on Gidon Kremer; still another shows the actor Vassilis Laggos as sounds begin to make his character aware of the world.

Above is a photo gallery drawn from photos taken by my wife. In them you can still see the tensions raging before the opening performance — and the sense of triumph that reigned after it was completed. The makers of "The Polyphony of the World" knew what they had accomplished.

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