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The Winds of Change Shift Moscow Theater

By John Freedman

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The end of a theater season is often a time for a bit of backstage maneuvering. There is still plenty of life left in this particular Moscow season, but the maneuvering is already in full swing.

The end of May saw the appointment of Mindaugas Karbauskis to the position of Artistic Director of the Mayakovsky Theater. The theater was run for the last decade without particular distinction by Sergei Artsibashev.

The choice of Karbauskis is fascinating and bold. At the age of 39, he is now one of the youngest heads of a major Moscow venue. Yevgeny Pisarev, who took over the reigns at the Pushkin Theater a year ago, is also 39.

Compare, for example, with Oleg Tabakov, 76, at the Chekhov Moscow Art Theater; Mark Zakharov, 78, at the Lenkom Theater; Alexander Shirvindt, 78, at the Satire Theater; Pyotr

Fomenko, 79, at the Fomenko Studio; and Yury Lyubimov, 93, at the Taganka Theater. Hold Lyubimov in your thoughts; we'll come back to him in a moment.

Karbauskis is also now the second Lithuanian in charge of a Moscow theater. His countryman Rimas Tuminas, 59, has been artistic director at the Vakhtangov Theater since 2007.

Karbauskis is a former student of Pyotr Fomenko who has won numerous awards with productions staged at the Tabakov Theater, the Chekhov Moscow Art Theater and the National Youth Theater. He has a reputation for creating shows that are long on both style and substance.

His first act at the Mayakovsky indicated that he plans to put his own personal stamp on his relationship with the company. When he learned that the administration invited only the elite members of the troupe to meet with him, he declined to attend unless the entire acting staff were invited.

For the time being, Karbauskis is not tipping off what his first production might be at his new theatrical home. But whatever it is, it is sure to be one of the most eagerly awaited shows of the coming season.

More or less at the same time that Karbauskis was taking over the Mayakovsky, another of the city's most active and important figures was stepping down from his duties.

Pavel Rudnev, 35, who spent six years as the Art Director of the Meyerhold Center, tendered his resignation on the penultimate day of May.

The Meyerhold Center was founded 20 years ago by Valery Fokin who, in the early years, used the organization as the producing arm for many of his shows. However, since Fokin became artistic director of the Alexandrinsky Theater in St. Petersburg in 2003, his presence in Moscow has been minimal.

During that time Rudnev transformed the Meyerhold Center into one of the city's most active and creative open spaces. He oversaw literally hundreds of events: tours by Russian provincial, and foreign theaters, master-classes with Russian and foreign artists; readings and workshops on contemporary drama; productions of new plays by emerging artists from Russia and other countries; seminars, lectures and festivals.

It is virtually impossible to overestimate the impact that Rudnev has had as a theater administrator who was always on the lookout for anything new, interesting and unusual.

In a statement published on his LiveJournal page, Rudnev wrote that he could no longer continue his work because the chief goal at the Meyerhold Center had become to use its space solely to make money.

"In this sense I always felt I was a burden, that I was superfluous," he wrote. "I was always in the way of people doing business. Everything I did was called 'freebie work'."

The Meyerhold Center responded on its website with an angry anonymous note assailing Rudnev's "lies," proclaiming his actions "shameful," and announcing a search for his replacement.

Rudnev explained to me in a phone call that he had no interest in becoming involved in a scandal.

"What we need to do now is to focus on what we accomplished over the years, not on what we failed to do," he said.

He expressed amazement at the number of people who have called to thank him for his work in recent years. Two of those callers were Oleg Tabakov and Pyotr Fomenko.

Rudnev said he has every intention of continuing his work elsewhere.

For good measure, Yury Lyubimov and his Taganka Theater have also been in the news for attempts to change — or block change — at the world-famous playhouse.

Lyubimov is seeking what he calls "autonomy" from the city bureaucracy, which runs his theater. At a meeting with his troupe in early June he presented his plans for what he believes will modernize the Taganka and make it a more viable venue for theater art.

Many in his troupe, however, see this as Lyubimov's effort to fire them, and they have taken steps to stop him. The newspaper Novaya Gazeta called it an attempt at a "coup" and laid down a long, complex narrative of charges and countercharges exchanged by Lyubimov and his opponents.

For those of us who were here to see the Taganka split into a two warring factions in the early 1990s, it all looks curiously familiar. One wonders, is it possible that the Taganka will split again and we will have three Tagankas on our hands?

God forbid!

Whatever the case, don't bet against Lyubimov. It is true that he is looking at his 94th birthday in September, but he may be blessed with more energy and spunk than Karabauskis, Pisarev and Rudnev put together.

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