

So, Do Theater and Politics Mix in Russia?

By [John Freedman](#)

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Jailed businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsy and writer Lyudmila Ulitskaya came together rather like Plato and Socrates last week to discuss the state of the State of Russia.

No, this was not an unexpected event involving the actual individuals, it was an unexpected event involving actors — Alexei Yudnikov and Yevdokiya Germanova — who played them on a stage.

And, yes, it was unexpected.

There are few things Russian theater avoids with more dexterity and conviction than politics. It has almost always been this way. In the 19th century plays that pushed too far into political or social commentary were routinely banned. Even after the revolution there was just a short window of time, during which directors and writers used theater as a mouthpiece for sociopolitical topics. Those efforts quickly fell by the wayside or turned into propaganda.

Maybe that is why in the highly political 1980s and 1990s there were only scattered attempts to engage in political theater in Russia. There is a sensation among Russians that politics are dirty and that theater is called, in some way at least, to remain "clean" by not involving itself in politics.

Over the last fifteen years, you could approach almost any theater artist and hear a variant of phrases like: "Oh, I pay no attention! That doesn't concern me! I just do my work."

That is changing, however. As the politicization of daily life continues to grow, and as the next presidential election on March 11, 2012 draws ever nearer, the notion of political neutrality is losing respect.

The staged reading of a series of letters exchanged by Khodorkovsky and Ulitskaya in 2008 and 2009 is a case in point.

The event, directed by Varvara Faer and hosted by Mikhail Kaluzhsky, was organized by Georg Genoux, the German-born founder of the Joseph Beuys Theater in Moscow. Genoux has repeatedly organized or staged politically-oriented productions in recent years.

His "Democracy.doc" is an interactive theater piece, in which spectators play the roles of various institutions, individuals and social concepts. "The Burden of Silence," which the Joseph Beuys Theater has performed most of the current season, is a highly-charged theatrical evening based on the reminiscences of Germans whose lives were changed drastically by the rule of Hitler.

When I attended this performance in the fall, the discussion that followed was as much about the silence that Russians direct at their own historical past as it was about anything that happened in Germany. During the discussion one could see Genoux sitting at the back of the packed house smiling. He had forced people to express what they were unused to saying.

Genoux has been an important force in bringing politics and theater into the same sphere. But he is hardly alone. A quick look around indicates that a significant movement may be gaining momentum.

Mikhail Ugarov and Yelena Gremina teamed up last year to stage a documentary play called "One Hour Eighteen," which tackles the topic of the mysterious death of attorney Sergei Magnitsky in prison in 2009. The play has performed to packed houses for over a year and has been presented in translation in London and Washington, D.C.

Actor Mikhail Yefremov and poet Dmitry Bykov created a fantastically popular series of harshly satirical political portraits called "Citizen Poet" six months ago. Originally broadcast on the Dozhd, or Rain, television channel, they now perform around Moscow in theaters. Yefremov, half-ironically and half-seriously taking on the persona of famous Russian writers or literary characters, delivers Bykov's barbed satires lampooning Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and pretty much everything else that goes on around or between those two figures.

Significantly, the "Citizen Poet" series became a major career move for Yefremov.

Always respected as an actor, Yefremov has also always existed somewhat in the shadow of his famous father, Oleg, the great actor and the artistic director of the Moscow Art Theater from the 1970s to the 2000s.

No more. Yefremov, Jr., has stepped out on his own. Political satire – and with teeth no less – gave him the opportunity to become his own man. The image of him swaggering about in a Hussar coat as he performs Bykov's parody of a Mikhail Lermontov poem from the early 19th century is burned in the public's subconscious. This is a supremely contemporary and timely image. It belongs exclusively to Yefremov and the second decade of the 2000s.

Maybe playwright Mikhail Durnenkov had something like that in mind when he wrote last week that belonging to the opposition is now "fashionable," whereas it used to be fashionable to not care.

Writing on Facebook, Durnenkov [declared](#) that to his "amazement" he realized he had a positive attitude about that. "We have always thought it was 'terrible to be in opposition.' I think the shift of the paradigm from 'terrible' to 'fashionable' is a genuine step towards democracy."

Durnenkov came to his realization after attending a round-table discussion called "Does Russia Need Political Theater?" at Moscow's Open Book Fair.

Not everyone saw and heard the same thing there, evidently.

Genoux, also writing on Facebook, had this to [say](#): "The discussion was grotesque and somewhat off-topic. Moscow theater people complained about their spectators, that thinking audiences have disappeared. Friends, don't be surprised: If you create expensive, pathos-laden and glamorous theater, that's just the kind of spectator you will attract. Spectators are as theater does..."

I am reminded of a comment I heard playwright Maksym Kurochkin make in January during a public discussion of contemporary Russian theater at a festival in Austin, TX. (I was present by way of Skype.) Kurochkin, one of Russia's most inventive and formally complex writers in any genre, stood up and said that the time has come to embrace socially-engaged plays.

He pointed out that plays which addressed social issues directly in the late 1980s were now so outdated that they are now "impossible" to read. "However," he added, "I have the feeling that the time has come when we must begin writing those plays that no one will be able to read in 20 years."

The reading of the Khodorkovsky-Ulitskaya correspondence at the Joseph Beuys Theater was not a "play," per se. But it was a theatrical and a political event. That is an innovation, but it is one that Moscow theater artists are increasingly trying on for size.

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