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# Signs of Life at Teatr.doc and Lyubimovka

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The crush at Teatr.doc has long been a given. The tiny basement hall of the feisty little theater that mixes social issues, journalism, politics and theater became something of a mecca for young, curious audiences shortly after it was founded in 2002.

We used to be amazed at the way they would cram 50 people into 30 seats. I remember a few years ago I counted 80 people in the hall for a showing of Vyacheslav Durnenkov's "Exhibits." I was sure the limit had been reached.

But you see, this is what I love about Moscow theater perhaps more than anything else: I don't care what your opinions or your convictions are — something up around the bend is waiting to overturn everything you believe.

I'm not talking about good and bad, like and don't like. Those are other categories entirely, which are no worse than any other. But one of the things about Teatr.doc is that the people

who work there seek to move beyond those simple, albeit useful, categories, and push on towards something deeper.

Right now Teatr.doc is hosting the Lyubimovka Young Playwriting Festival. I never have seen crowds like this before. People are cramming the house for readings that sometimes run from noon to 11 p.m. For every seat that is vacated during the day, two more people seem to come to claim it.

I sat near playwright Nina Belenitskaya at a reading of Yury Muravitsky's play "Pornography" at mid-week. We, and not only we, were packed in like sardines. Each of us maneuvered and fought for every free centimeter of seating space. Suffice it to say that very little of that anatomical place on my body that does the sitting for me actually had a place to sit. Frankly, it was excruciating. Entire parts of my body went numb in 10 minutes. People stood and hunched and crouched in all corners of the hall and the stage itself. It was difficult to tell where the audience left off and the actors began.

I looked up and saw that one smart person was actually standing outside the basement and following events as he stood at a window and peered in at the madding crowd.

At one point I began to count spectators but I kept getting lost as people moved or the lights went down. Fortunately for prosperity Ms. Belenitskaya did the job for me. The next morning she posted on her Facebook page that she counted 145 people. So that's what it has come to!

The night before the reading of "Pornography" there was a two-pronged reading bringing together highly controversial topics — "Conversation in a Kitchen Two Days Before Arrest" and "Two in Your Home." The former is about the couple who planned and carried out the murder of attorney Stanislav Markelov and journalist Anastasia Baburova in 2009. The latter is about the situation in the home of Belarus presidential candidate Vladimir Neklyayev after he was confined to house arrest. Both pieces are still works-in-progress, with premiere dates still months away.

Here, too, every free nook and cranny in the space at Teatr.doc was occupied by human flesh. Windows were opened to actually allow air into the space. Actors had only a small circle of space in which to work.

What is going on here?

Well, people are coming to hear what they cannot hear elsewhere. This is a place — Lyubimovka and Teatr.doc — where hard questions are raised, shirking responsibility is not welcome and people speak out, both on stage and from the hall. The conversations following the readings are often barbed.

Ksenia Larina, the Echo Moskvy radio host, stated that "Conversations" is initiating a "dangerous game," with its portrait of two often charismatic, though cold-blooded, anti-heroes. The two lovers bill and coo and kiss and hug as they plan to walk out and murder fellow human beings. The texts, compiled by journalist Sergei Sokolov, are drawn from official FSB records, actual private conversations that were recorded in full through eavesdropping devices.

Writing on Facebook, Larina repeated her suspicion that this show plays a "dangerous game" and expanded on her concerns: "There's something horrible and seductive in these common dialogues where a savage cave-like philosophy of murder arises from lovey-dovey talk and revolutionary romanticism."

Both of the politically-based readings drew audience members whose experience both tests and fills out the work done by actors on stage. One active speaker following the reading of excerpts from "Conversations" was a self-proclaimed natsbol, or member of the banned National Bolshevik Party, who convincingly claimed to have spent time in prison for his beliefs. A resident of Belarus took it on herself to correct some of the impressions created by scenes from "Two in Your House," a piece that, when it is finished, will portray the atmosphere in Neklyayev's home after two Belarus KGB officers were stationed in his apartment 24 hours a day.

All of this is taking us far beyond "theater." These are actual signs of life.

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