

Recognition for Theaters in the Russian Provinces

By [John Freedman](#)

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A few years back I was invited to Magnitogorsk to be a jury member for the Theater Without Borders festival. It was — I say "was" because it no longer exists — a festival that championed non-Moscow Russian theater. It was, I was told when I arrived, a showcase of "theater made in the provinces." The point was that nobody spoke of "provincial theater"; the adjective "provincial" is a pejorative. The "provinces" — a definition of place — is the proper term.

One more thing on that: I noticed that the festival opened with a production from St. Petersburg. "What do those from St. Petersburg think of being included in this festival?" I asked. "They haven't given up their claim to being Russia's capital yet."

"True," was the answer from our local handler, "they may not like it. But like it or not St. Petersburg is in the provinces too."

I'm not going to touch that with a ten-foot pole. I love St. Petersburg, I have lived there, and I even still have friends there.

Whatever the case may be, I remembered these details a few days ago when an item [published](#) on Forbes.ru started showing up in postings on my Facebook page. Written by Yulia Yakovleva, its purpose is clearly stated in the title: "Ten Provincial Theaters Worth Visiting."

Okay, so the Forbes.ru editors are politically incorrect. Let's move past that. And, okay, once you get into the article you'll see that St. Petersburg is snubbed, presumably because the author is one of those who consider St. Petersburg one of Russia's capitals. But let's skip that, too, because the purpose of this exercise is to recognize that there is a lot of interesting theater happening in places that don't always get the headlines.

The venues cited in the article are: Omsk Drama Theater, Pushkin Drama Theater of Krasnoyarsk, Krasny Fakel in Novosibirsk, Voronezh Chamber Theater, SamArt of Samara, Kiselyov Youth Theater of Saratov, Kolyada Theater of Yekaterinburg, Nizhny Novgorod Youth Theater, Pushkin Drama Theater of Magnitogorsk, U Mosta Theater of Perm.

Each theater is represented in a slide show with photo and text. Since relatively functional internet translators are available at everyone's fingertips, I won't waste space here translating what is said about each playhouse. You can do that yourself if you don't have Russian. I will add a few comments of my own, however.

All of these theaters have been nominated for Golden Mask awards at one time or another. Some have run away with hordes of awards, more have come away empty-handed. That means nothing. Everybody knows awards are a pig in a poke.

But I mention the Golden Masks because the Omsk Drama Theater was a prominent participant in one of the most controversial Golden Mask festivals ever. When the theater walked away with three top awards in 1997 – Best Director (Vladimir Petrov), Best Actor (Mikhail Okunev) and Best Actress (Araki Kadzuko) for their work in Kobo Abe's "The Woman in the Dunes" – Moscow was scandalized. What?! How can this be?!

The production, by the way, was brilliant. And everyone deserved their award. You have that from someone who was there as a witness.

I would add that Omsk is also the home of the Omsk Fifth Theater, another cutting edge house that works with top-notch directors, fine actors and lots of interesting, non-mainstream material.

Perm's U Mosta Theater has made a mighty reputation as a house working on an interesting mix of classic plays and contemporary English-language dramas. In fact, if there is one thing U Mosta is famous for above all, it is its productions of the plays of Martin McDonough. The Irish writer enjoyed an extraordinary boom of interest in Russia three or four seasons ago and that was due, in large part, to the efforts of U Mosta. Under the guidance of founder and artistic director Sergei Fedotov, the playhouse has explored McDonough's eerie world of outsiders, savants and crazies with great success. One of scores of theaters that were opened during the Perestroika years, it is one of just a few that continue to work and expand

its operations.

Mikhail Bychkov's Chamber Theater from Voronezh became a household word in Russian theater households about a decade ago. Bychkov staged several attention-getting works that ranged from dramatizations of Fyodor Dostoevsky's prose to productions of contemporary plays by Yevgeny Grishkovets and Lasha Bugadze.

The Kiselyov Youth Theater of Saratov is one of the most ambitious of all theaters in the provinces. In recent years it has set up festivals to develop new directors and new writers, and has attracted numerous directors from abroad to work on its stage. At the end of October the renowned German director Matthias Langhoff will open his latest show in Saratov – a rendition of Heiner Muller's "Sophocles. Oedipus the Tyrant." Last season the theater attracted international attention when the American avantgardist Lee Breuer opened a bracing production of Sam Shepard's "The Curse of the Starving Class" in Saratov.

I have had many opportunities – and will have more – to write about Nikolai Kolyada's Kolyada Theater. There is no wonder that his small playhouse in Yekaterinburg is included in the Forbes list. Kolyada is a renaissance man who is playwright, director, manager, teacher, mentor, producer and friend to anyone taking the time to walk through the doors of his theatrical home. And a home it is, for Kolyada has outfitted his space with all kinds of warm, fuzzy, humorous and meaningful homey objects. The theater he creates is as serious as the interior of his playhouse is eclectic. Suffice it to say that last year I attended a performance of his production of Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire" with American director Bob Falls who called the production the best he had ever seen of the play in his life.

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