

Cutting Edge Drama at Omsk's Fifth Theater

By [John Freedman](#)

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Pavel Shishin just arrived home in Omsk a few days ago. He claims not to be thinking straight because the jet lag has got him. His flight, you see, came in from Ireland, where he just spent a year studying and writing a Masters of Philosophy dissertation on the Irish playwright Frank McGuinness.

Everybody in Omsk seems to know Shishin has returned, however. Our conversation is interrupted several times, usually by people who are convinced that only Shishin can solve their problems.

With no small sense of satisfaction, Shishin admits he has acted in seven productions over the last few years, but that is not his day job. In fact, he is the literary director at the small but mighty [Fifth Theater](#) in Omsk, a venue that received its name for obvious reasons — there were four theaters in the city before it was founded. It is one of numerous playhouses around

Russia that were established during Perestroika; in this case the year was 1990 and the founder was Sergei Radzinsky. As Pavel told me, and as you can hear and see by clicking on the image above, the theater was created largely in order to develop new work.

Over the years that has meant that numerous cutting edge directors and writers have collaborated with the playhouse. Portraits of such directors as Alexei Yankovsky, Andro Yenukidze, Ivan Popovski, and Anatoly Praudin are displayed on the walls of the theater's second-floor foyer. At present the theater employs 33 actors and a support staff of approximately 150 people.

Shishin isn't certain about that last figure, however. After a year's leave of absence he suspects some things may have changed.

"Things do change quickly," he tells me with a wry laugh.

Starting in 2002 the theater began hosting the Young Theaters of Russia Festival. As one poster proclaims in the theater's entrance, the event has introduced Omsk spectators to 80 theaters from 17 countries in the ensuing years. At first it was an annual festival, but beginning in 2009 it has run every other year in tandem with another international project, a new play laboratory.

Some years, like the present one for instance, the two events join forces. In addition to the regular festival fare on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday this week, Shishin is hosting staged readings of three contemporary American plays — Annie Baker's "The Aliens," Suzan-Lori Parks' "The Book of Grace" and Deborah Zoe Laufer's "End Days."

(Allow me here a disclosure: I am one of the organizers of the New American Plays for Russia program that was funded by the U.S. Embassy in Moscow under the aegis of the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission. And I am in Omsk to take part in the first public presentations of three of the project's seven plays.)

Last year Shishin oversaw a highly successful laboratory exploring new plays from Germany. Two of them ended up entering the repertory at the Fifth Theater — "The Ugly One" by Marius von Mayenburg, and "Nord-Ost" by Torsten Buchsteiner, which Shishin calls "a frightening play and a frightening performance." This is a documentary work based on the events surrounding the terrorist attack on the "Nord-Ost" musical in Moscow in 2002.

"I think terrorism is a big issue," Shishin explains. "We have to talk about it. We cannot pretend that there is no such thing as terrorism in the contemporary world. The history of the last decade shows us that."

To see and hear this and other comments by Shishin, click on the video above.

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