

# Annie Baker Brings "The Aliens" to Moscow and St. Petersburg

By [John Freedman](#)

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"It was one of the stranger, more wonderful experiences of my life, seeing my play read in Russian," Annie Baker told me in St. Petersburg on Saturday evening.

She was talking about her play "The Aliens," which originally opened at Rattlestick Playwrights Theater in New York in 2010, but has been presented in staged readings in Russian in Omsk, Moscow and St. Petersburg over the course of the last month.

(For the purposes of full disclosure, I state here that I am one of the organizers of the New American Plays for Russia project, through which Baker's and six other American plays have been translated, adapted and presented in Russia under a grant from the U.S. Embassy in Moscow under the aegis of the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission.)

Baker, who is considered one of the most promising young playwrights in American theater, made the trip to Russia to see the readings in Moscow and St. Petersburg. I cornered her

in a well-lighted, but chaotic rehearsal space at St. Petersburg's hottest new venue, On.Teatr, and asked her to tell me a bit about the experience.

She said she was "taken aback" by the fact that people she "doesn't know in a foreign country" have become so deeply interested in her work. Indeed, her public appearances — including question and answer sessions following readings — have drawn full houses and enthusiastic audiences. Following the reading in Moscow one spectator proclaimed Annie the "American Chekhov."

One of the reasons that her play touched Russian audiences so deeply is that it was adapted by Mikhail Durnenkov, one of the top figures in the so-called New Russian drama movement. Working from a literal translation created by Yekaterina Raikova, Durnenkov spent several months fine-tuning the Russian text in ways that made it more accessible to Russians through its lexicon, intonations and sensibilities.

"Durnenkov and I were weirdly simpatico," Baker says with a smile. She added that in him she felt she had "met the Russian male version of myself."

She was also moved and amused by the way that Durnenkov squirmed and suffered his way through the Moscow reading alongside her. "I felt as though he had written the play as much as I had," she declared.

In Moscow, Baker also found time to attend three local productions — Yury Butusov's staging of "The Seagull" at the Satirikon, Kama Ginkas's "Rothschild's Fiddle" at the Theater Yunogo Zritelya, and Marat Gatsalov and Mikhail Ugarov's production of Pavel Pryazhko's "Life Is Grand" at Teatr.doc. She was impressed by the variety of the shows — Butusov knocking her out by taking the stage himself to dance during act breaks and scene transitions, Ginkas with his "beautiful, mournful production," and the cast of "Life Is Grand" showing her "some of the best acting I have seen in a long time."

"I am determined to get someone to bring this show to New York," she said.

Baker's next project in New York is an adaptation of Anton Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya." She has already completed the writing, but while in Moscow she spent time hunting for appropriate costumes for the future show.

To hear Annie talk in detail about these topics and more, click on the image above.

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