The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

An Actor on the Political Stage

By John Freedman

December 15, 2011

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's televised talk on Thursday — billed as "A Continuation of the Conversation" — had hardly begun when actor Alexei Devotchenko sent out a salvo on Facebook, indicating he was following the event on Echo Moskvy radio.

"On Echo they're saying that the vast majority among the police are on the side of the people," Devotchenko wrote. "How about arresting Putin right in the middle of today's 'live broadcast,' right in the middle of his, so to speak, 'continuation of the conversation'?"

Not everything Devotchenko writes on Facebook, or says in public, can be printed in a newspaper. He has emerged as, arguably, the most outspoken political commentator in the world of theater and film. His is an angry, strident voice that often resorts to the riches of Russian obscenities to bring his exhortations home.

That is not to say that his arguments lack coherence or intelligence. Devotchenko frequently expresses himself with force and clear thinking in interviews, open letters and in popular blog posts on Live Journal, the Echo Moskvy website and elsewhere.

Hailing from St. Petersburg, Devotchenko was at the forefront of a loose public movement attacking Valentina Matviyenko for corruption and a lax attitude to residents' needs during her term as St. Petersburg governor. The actor's commentary of Matviyenko's inability to clean the city of dangerous snow and ice was especially caustic and memorable. Eventually the governor resigned and moved to Moscow, where, with the aid of her friend and benefactor Putin, she was appointed Chair of the Federation Council of the Russian Federation.

There were no signs that this "victory" gave Devotchenko reason to ease up his public appeals, however. On the contrary, having relocated to Moscow himself, he redoubled his efforts to speak out against Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev.

Most recently, at the end of November, he relinquished all the state awards he has accumulated over his career, including two State Prizes and the status award known as Honorary Actor of the Russian Federation.

"I no longer want to carry the proud rank of 'Honored Actor of the RF,' received from the hands of Valentina Ivanovna Matviyenko," he wrote on his blog, as reported by Pravda.ru. "Fortunately I didn't receive this knickknack from her personally, because that day I fled to the country. It was given to me later. I do not want to be a two-time laureate of the State Prize of the RF, received from the hands of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. True, this was during his previous accession to the throne. Shameful."

Equally as important, the actor brings his convictions to his art.

In Kama Ginkas's production of "The Diary of a Madman" at the Theater Yunogo Zritelya in Moscow, Devotchenko incorporates strokes of political commentary as he plays a man who is hounded by society and his own demons, and who grows more belligerent as his grip on sanity increasingly eludes him. A scene of him slapping photos of Medvedev, pop stars Fillip Kirkorov and Alla Pugachyova on a wall alongside his own portrait is loaded with poison irony.

Devotchenko also carries his message in a one-man show called "Farewell Waltz," directed by Vladimir Mikhelson, that he has performed for the last six months on various stages around Russia. This is a piece cobbled together out of poetry written by Nobel Prize winning poet Joseph Brodsky. But it begins and ends with recordings of historical broadcasts that frame everything in between in a political light.

In the opening moments the actor sits almost motionless as he listens to a radio account of a Brezhnev-era Communist Party Congress in which the reporter assures us that every word spoken was greeted by "sustained, stormy applause." Devotchenko's responses are slight but expressive and are met with "stormy" laughter among the audience — eyes suddenly opening wide, fingers abruptly turning downward, a quick, doubting movement of the head to the side. As minimal as Devotchenko's responses are, his actions are eloquent and bitterly satirical.

Ninety minutes later the show ends with a recording of Putin announcing the formation of his now-notorious People's Front to further his political endeavors. But this time, like a broken record, the Prime Minister's words cannot move past the phrase, "all political forces must be equal, United Russia, trade unions and youth organizations..." The words are repeated over

and over again perhaps a dozen times as the actor finally loses patience and disappears from the stage to laughter and applause.

In fact, the performance of "Farewell Waltz" has a minimum of politics at its core. Instead, Devotchenko uses Brodsky's works to paint the picture of a person alone in society, one who is constantly at the mercy of the social machine. We are introduced to simple people who have been lost to their friends and themselves, or ground under by the complexities of life. They live normal lives colored with life's usual little tragedies.

Yet politics is never far from the surface, no matter what the topic of a given scene. And some of the biggest laughter of the evening is reserved for a tale about a family that suddenly finds itself arguing incoherently about the meaning of Vladimir Lenin in their lives. The poet-observer, played by Devotchenko, is utterly baffled by this development until he one day visits the toilet and finds that in place of toilet paper, the family has been using pages from Lenin's complete works to maintain their hygiene. Each of them, as a result, has read some quote than no one else in the family will ever see — that page is now lost to the city's sewage system.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/12/15/an-actor-on-the-political-stage-a34302