

Happy New Year!

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What is the end of the year to a theater critic? Hibernation time and little else.

Although you do get a few musical theaters running "The Nutcracker" here during the expanded Yuletide season, it's nothing like the way it's done in the United States. In fact, as far as I can tell, theaters that do "The Nutcracker" here do it primarily to pull in foreigners.

Some theaters open new shows at the end of the year, but by and large by the 23rd or 24th of December the flow of new shows stops. And it won't pick up again until mid-January.

If you're new to Russia, you may not yet know that this country blissfully begins drifting into a haze of reverie around the time of what is locally known as "Catholic Christmas." That lovely state of suspension and disconnection lasts through what is called the Old New Year on Jan. 14.

I once lived for a half a year in France and was astonished to see Paris go absolutely empty for the month of August. It was like living in one of the old ghost towns in Southern California

where I grew up — nothing but skittish rabbits, broken-down fences, gusts of wind and tumbling tumbleweeds.

Well, Moscow is like that from about Dec. 24 to Jan. 14. Don't talk to me about productivity statistics, please! My colleagues and I have worked hard enough. We have put out enough product over the last year, and we enjoy our opportunity to collapse exhausted into a chair, whether it is soft or not.

Ay, but there is the rub, as one old writer occasionally put it.

In fact, there are people here who work like maniacs during the holiday season. For the most part these are young people, often students, although that is not a hard and fast rule. Also, for the most part, these are actors, or at least people who imagine, or imagined, themselves as being actors one day.

The job they do is important and in high demand — they play Father Frost and Snow Queen for New Year's parties, Christmas parties, school parties, office parties, family get-togethers, wintertime pageants, and that revered staple of the New Year season — the "yolka."

Now, "yolka" means a pine tree, or, in the proper context, a New Years tree. You may call it a Christmas tree. But, by association, "yolka" is also a party that — at least metaphorically — is held around the holiday tree.

Thus we have that most frequent of phrases heard among young actors as the year comes to an end: "Are you working any yolkas?"

I know a husband and wife pair who worked a commercially-staged yolka that ran for the whole holiday season. They were on stilts and they performed 12 hours a day with 15 minute breaks between shows. When the Old New Year arrived, they ended up in the hospital from exhaustion.

Father Frosts and Snow Queens tend to work on a "smaller" scale. I put "smaller" in quotes because I have known people to work 18 to 20 hours a day for three weeks straight during this time of year, racing from party to party, putting in appearances by contract and schedule at events in apartments, offices and community centers scattered all over Moscow and the Moscow suburban area. I have known Father Frosts and their trusty Snow Queens to fall asleep on the metro, not only missing their stop, but missing their next appointment. I have known Father Frosts finally to just give it up and go home and crash, appointments be damned.

This is not, I may add, the best way to run a business (and a business it is, believe me). When you have a household full of children waiting for Father Frost to show up with his silver-and-blue-adorned sidekick and no knock ever comes on the door, things can get complicated. Children tend to cry. Parents tend to threaten. If you're planning on playing Father Frost and Snow Queen this year, you may want to get a separate phone number to use for these few weeks exclusively. That way nobody can track you down later if you burn out somewhere between the Bulvar Dmitriya Donskogo and Bulvar Admirala Ushakova metro stops and don't make it to your next gig.

I mentioned the word "business." That fact of the matter is that many young actors actually make so much money during the three weeks of the year-end holidays that they can support themselves for most of the entire following year.

That is in principle, of course. That might be true for someone who knows how to create and faithfully observe a budget.

Ay, but there's that rub again. You just watch. Starting around mid-January, keep an eye on the crowds in Moscow's restaurants and coffee shops. My bet is you'll see them packed with kids blowing a year's budget earned over the New Year on cappuccino, cheese cake and good company. I don't know as I can blame them.

Happy New Year to them all!

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