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Remembering Vadim Levanov

By John Freedman

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We will have reason to remember Vadim Levanov for years to come. For starters I will write about him again in March when his play "Ksenia of St. Petersburg" premieres at the National Youth Theater. Another production of that play is still drawing crowds at the Alexandrinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, as is his modern adaptation of "Hamlet" at the same theater.

Levanov, who, according to his friend Zhenya Berkovich, wanted to outlive Anton Chekhov, died in the early morning hours of Dec. 25, 2011. Chekhov lived 44 years and 6 months, Levanov — 44 years and 10 months, the victim of prostate cancer. After undergoing treatment in Israel and Moscow throughout the fall, the writer died in his hometown of Tolyatti.

Levanov will always be associated with what has come to be known as the "Tolyatti phenomenon." In fact, he created it virtually single-handed.

In the late 1990s he was asked to assume control of the so-called May Readings, an obscure annual poetry festival held each spring in Tolyatti, and to breathe life back into it. He agreed on the condition that he be allowed to change its focus to drama. Within half a decade he had

transformed it into a national event. Not only did his own plays attract attention, but a small group of talented local writers came together around him, each writing plays of significance. These included Yury Klavdiyev and the brothers Vyacheslav and Mikhail Durnenkov. All have gone on to gain international reputations.

I first met Levanov properly at May Readings in 2006. It was a homespun affair held in a rundown old library located at Ulitsa Golosova 20. That's how everybody talked about the location — "Is today's event at Golosova 20?" "Will you be at Golosova 20 tonight?" Readings of plays by the Durnenkovs, Klavdiyev, Levanov and many others were held in two small halls filled with crowds consisting of locals and visitors from abroad.

Levanov, who had walked with a cane since an accident in his 20s, attended most, if not all, of the events. But he spent the bulk of his time seated in a corner in a back room telling and listening to tall tales around a splintered coffee table laden with used tea bags, partially eaten cookies and glasses half full of cognac or vodka.

The first thing that struck me as I chatted with Vadim informally was his modesty. He had a wry smile that always seemed to suggest things could be much better than they were, but maybe they weren't as bad as they might be. And that, his smile and eyes suggested, meant things were pretty good, all things considered.

Soft-spoken and disinclined to make grand statements, he wasn't much interested in telling me how May Readings had turned into an important event on the Russian theater calendar. He pretty much shrugged his shoulders and indicated that it had happened on its own.

I got different stories from the writers whose lives he had changed. Mikhail Durnenkov and Klavdiyev both spoke affectionately and with great respect about how much Levanov meant to them. The younger local writers spoke of Levanov with downright reverence.

A sign of Levanov's character is the way he responded to the success that came quickly to his "pupils." He never betrayed the slightest jealousy when the Durnenkovs and Klavdiyev were staged throughout Russia and translated and produced abroad while his own professional achievements remained modest. On the contrary, he was invariably ready and willing to talk about his friends' latest plays and productions, and to share in celebrations of their triumphs. And when his own plays became hits – Valery Fokin's production of "Ksenia of St. Petersburg" at the Alexandrinsky was nominated for a Golden Mask award in 2010 – you would never have known it by his behavior or attitude.

No matter what the situation Levanov always had the air of someone who looked down on everything – success, failure and everything in between – from a vantage point where most things appeared to be equal.

Levanov was a fixture at the Lyubimovka young play festival in Moscow each fall. In recent years his bad leg tended to confine him to a wheel chair, no easy thing to deal with in Russia. But he had a way of making his disability seem like he was privileged. His wheel chair was like a working man's throne, around which everyone gathered eagerly.

The last time I met Levanov was at the end of May in 2011. The May Readings festival by then

had been consigned to history, its huge success in the first decade of the century having caused its downfall as writers like Mikhail Durnenkov and Yury Klavdiyev migrated to Moscow and St. Petersburg, respectively. Levanov was in Moscow in May for the opener of his play "Gerontophobia," which was staged by Zhenya Berkovich at the Winzavod complex.

After the first show was over we stood together in a dark corridor and made small talk, most of it about the eerie beauty of the space in which we were located – an old wine cellar deep beneath the surface of the earth. Vadim was impressed by the fact that the cellar, according to tile figures encrusted in the walls high above us, was built in 1856.

"This was here four years before the serfs were freed," Vadim said quietly.

As always, he was on an even keel emotionally, especially for someone who had just witnessed the performance of his newest play. And, as always, we chatted about the Durnenkovs and Klavdiyev and what they were up to. But that was Vadim, taking things in stride.

About this time we learned that Levanov was ill. Berkovich mounted a campaign that in a short period raised over $80,000 internationally for his treatment. I mention this because of the extraordinary response that came from all over the world, from people who loved and respected Vadim and considered themselves his friends.

The last time I talked to Levanov was by Skype. It was in June and he was in the hospital in Tolyatti undergoing tests. We had agreed he would call me at a certain time, but he had not yet done so. I saw he was online and so I dialed him first. It turned out that his father was in his room and they were still visiting. I apologized and told them to go on with their chat, but Levanov, Sr. politely said, no, he was on his way out. I told him he had a lot of people pulling for his son. Showing me a familiar low-key smile, he wished me well and left the room. Vadim curled up comfortably on his hospital bed and we talked about his life and his work.

As ever he was self-effacing and forgetful of facts and numbers. And there was that look in his eyes again that none of this was really important. All of this – our talk and the reasons for it, the premiere of "Gerontophobia" – were a pleasant distraction, but probably not much more than that. It was the same down-to-earth Vadim Levanov I had met five years earlier at Golosova 20.

It might be that Levanov was already coming to terms with the illness that would kill him in half a year's time. But as I think back on that now I'm inclined to think it was more than that. From the first day I met him to the last time I talked to him I was impressed by Vadim Levanov's directness and his sincerity. He had what Russians admiringly call "prostota" – simplicity. He never put on airs, and he was always at home with himself. That drew people to him, it inspired them with confidence and it allowed him to have insight into what makes people tick.

According to Pavel Rudnev's beautiful remembrance of Levanov, published in numerous sources, Levanov's last words were "there are no angels beside me." Memorable words, those. They surely will go down in the register of famous Russian literary death bed phrases, alongside Chekhov's "I haven't had champagne in a long time." But I can't help but agree with Rudnev, who added: "If there were no angels beside him, then they don't exist at all."

Many of Levanov's two dozen plays have yet to be staged, and some, like "The Bloody Noblewomen of Darya Saltykova," an unflinching look at a mass murderer in the 18th century, have intrigued directors for years. "Ksenia of St. Petersburg" remains the writer's chief calling card at present, but I would not be surprised to see several more of his plays making their way onto stages in the near future. We were only just getting to know Vadim Levanov when he left us.

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