

Drama Section of Golden Mask Fest Set to Begin

By [John Freedman](#)

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The 18th Golden Mask Festival's much-awaited drama segment starts Friday and will finish April 16 with an awards ceremony at the Bolshoi Theater. **Lyudmila Zypkina**

If pressed to describe in one word the entries in the category of drama in this year's Golden Mask Festival, the 18th since its inception in 1995, I think "big" would do well.

Ultimately of course, one word won't do us at all, so to find the proper descriptions we'll have to get out and see the 17 dramatic productions, three puppet shows and four genre-challenging nominees in the experiment category. While performances of opera, ballet and contemporary dance have been taking place since the beginning of March, the drama segment commences on Friday with "Buddenbrooks" at the National Youth Theater and will conclude with the traditional gala awards ceremony on April 16 on the renovated main stage of the Bolshoi Theater.

But let's take a look at "big" for a moment. Even some of the seven nominees for productions

in the "small form" grouping are hardly small.

"Brother Ivan Fyodorovich," directed by Sergei Zhenovach for Moscow's Studio of Theatrical Art, may be an intimate show constructed of scenes usually performed by two and three people, but it is based on one of the biggest, most complex novels in all of Russian literature – Fyodor Dostoevsky's "The Brothers Karamazov." Moreover, it plays on the full-sized main stage at Zhenovach's beautiful theater located a stone's throw from Taganskaya Ploshchad.

Consider also Lev Erenburg's "Three Sisters" for St. Petersburg's Small Drama Theater. Erenburg, a powerful director for whom the only color of heat is white, probably couldn't do "small" if world peace depended on it. He has been nominated for Golden Masks several times in recent years for passionate, sweeping productions of plays by Maxim Gorky and Alexander Ostrovsky. I have not yet seen his production of Anton Chekhov's "Three Sisters," but I have seen the faces of those who have. In October, I arrived in Omsk one day after the show had played at a festival there, and people were still walking around with dazed eyes wide open and mouths hanging agape.

Small? I doubt it.

Over in the large-form category, where 10 shows are vying for a single Golden Mask, the situation is downright expansive. Here we have a group of shows that may be traditional or unorthodox in manner, but which are all, well, very big.

St. Petersburg director Andrei Moguchy — whose name, incidentally, means "mighty" — will bring to town his production of "Happiness" for the Alexandrinsky Theater. Employing puppets, film, live actors and live musicians, this dreamlike, free interpretation of Maurice Maeterlinck's "The Blue Bird" is arguably one of the most inventive of all the nominees.

Perennial Golden Mask nominee Lev Dodin this year is up for an award for his production of Chekhov's "Three Sisters" at the Maly Drama Theater. Dodin is another of those artists who just does "big" no matter what he is up to. This is old-fashioned, highly wrought, deep-seated Russian psychological realism as no one else anywhere has been doing for years.

Andrzej Buben's production of American playwright Tracy Letts' "August. Osage County" for the Omsk Drama Theater is a towering work in every sense of the word. At over three-hours running time and featuring a cast of 13, it is a multifaceted story that chronicles the lives of an extended family. The set by Pawel Dobrzycki — who, curiously, is not nominated for his design — is an intricate and beautiful replica of a huge two-story Midwestern American house.

Several Moscow shows are massive in their scope and execution. They include Yevgeny Arye's dramatization of Isaac Bashevis Singer's novel, "Enemies — A Story of Love" at the Sovremennik Theater; Mindaugas Karbauskis' interpretation of Thomas Mann's thick novel, "Buddenbrooks"; Eimuntas Nekrosius' nearly four-hour rendition of Albert Camus' "Caligula" for the Theater of Nations; and Yury Butusov's exhilarating, nearly five-hour deconstruction and reassembling of Chekhov's "The Seagull" for the Satirikon Theater.

As if single-handedly seeking to justify the theme of size at this year's festival, the Satirikon is also nominated for Valery Fokin's production of "Konstantin Raikin. An Evening with

Dostoevsky." One would expect this one-man show based on Dostoevsky's "Notes from Underground" to be small and intimate. But through the employment of shadows, a huge wall erected almost on the edge of the stage, and some neatly subtle music by Alexander Bakshi, this piece paints a vast picture of the Dostoevsky novella.

Be all that as it may, the variety of any Golden Mask Festival defies simple definition, and this year is no different.

Kirill Serebrennikov's "Thugs" for the Seventh Studio was an experimental work that emerged from a series of performances staged at the Winzavod complex by the director and his students from the Moscow Art Theater School early last summer. This piece — nominated in the small-form category — captured attention for the political message contained in its portrait of angry youth rebelling against the status quo.

The four nominees in the experiment category could not be more unlike each other.

The Derevo physical theater troupe of St. Petersburg and Dresden has been a frequent nominee throughout the Golden Mask Festival's history. Its current nomination came about for a production called "Harlequin," which explores the nature of the actor and the role an actor plays in the theater.

"The Gods Fell," directed by Viktor Ryzhakov and produced by the Lyubimovka Festival, is a brief, half-hour show performed in the kitchen of the editorial offices of Afisha magazine. Written by Selma Dimitrijevic, a playwright from Serbia, it explores the seemingly simple, but endlessly complex conversations that a mother has with her daughter.

Always a highlight of any Golden Mask are the unconventional performances by the Akhe Theater of Engineering from St. Petersburg, of which "The Depot of Ingenious Delusions" is sure to be another this year. According to a description by critic Pavel Rudnev on the festival website, "the spectator enters the hall and sees several scenes unfolding at once, each illustrating 'ingenious delusions' physically and scenographically through amazing effects utilizing light and geometrical figures, the vibrations of a body and of color."

Rounding out the nominees for experiment is Yury Muravitsky's production of Sasha Denisova's "Light My Fire" at Teatr.doc. This rousing, ironic performance employs historical information and texts devised by actors to tell the story of musicians Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix as if they were not Americans but actually grew up in Uzbekistan or somewhere on the Volga River.

Of three nominees for best puppet show, two are from St. Petersburg — "Kolobok" by the Big Puppet Theater and "The Tea Service Will Most Likely Occur," a rendition of "Alice in Wonderland" by the Karlsson-Haus Theater Studio. The Puppet Theater of Chelyabinsk brings its production of Kate DiCamillo's children's novel about a wayward toy rabbit, "The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane."

Tickets can be purchased at the Theater Union, located at 10 Strastnoi Bulvar (Metro Chekhovskaya) or reserved online at www.goldenmask.ru. Tel. 507-3553.

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6