

An American Editor Seeks What's New in Russian Theater

By [John Freedman](#)

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Tom Sellar sees a lot of theater around the world in his capacity as editor of the prestigious Theatre magazine published by Yale University. He knows American theater well — particularly American theater made in New York — because of his position as theater critic for the Village Voice. Over the years he has kept an eye on Russian theater as well.

Starting in 2003 he began taking stock of theater in Eastern Europe, looking to put together a series of special issues of Theatre based on work in Russia, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Ukraine and Poland. Those issues, which came out over a prolonged period for most of the first decade of the century, informed American readers of some of the most important writers, directors, theaters and trends in the East.

Sellar was in Moscow in 2005 collecting information and doing interviews for a double issue of his magazine on the state of the art in Russia. That issue, which came out in 2006, has been through numerous print runs and is still one of the main sources for information in English

on Russian theater in the 2000s.

I crossed paths with Sellar on Saturday at the Meyerhold Center and asked him to give me five minutes of his time. He is currently in Moscow to attend the Russian Case festival, a small showcase put on for foreigners within the Golden Mask Festival. We sat down in the theater's cafeteria in front of a poster for Vsevolod Meyerhold's ground-breaking production of Nikolai Erdman's "The Mandate" in 1925. It seemed like a fitting place to talk about the innovative theater Tom is here to see this month.

He pointed out that one show he attended, "Two in Your House" at Teatr.doc, is an example of the new political work cropping up in Russia. Based on the story of a Belarusian presidential candidate who was put under house arrest after losing the election in 2010, it is an example of new political theater "acquiring special power," said Sellar.

One difference he noticed since his last trip to Moscow is that "no one wanted to talk politics" in 2005. "I was surprised by that," he said. Now everybody is talking about it and "the discussions have been as interesting as the plays," he declared.

He also attended a performance of Yury Butusov's "The Seagull" at the Satirikon, a show of "extraordinary energy" that, he added, demonstrates the "making and unmaking of Russian traditional classical theater" today.

When I asked Sellar about an interview he did with the Ukrainian-born, Russian-language playwright and director Klim a few years back, he smiled and called him "an extraordinary figure" who had some very pessimistic opinions about the future of politics in Ukraine. "He expects to see a war, a bloodbath" between the two political factions in that country, Sellar explained. "He is pessimistic about what can be done by artists in these circumstances."

To hear these and other comments Tom Sellar made, watch the video of our chat above.

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