

How Actors and Riot Police Make Bad Partners

By [John Freedman](#)

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A street show by Donatas Grudovich's Partisan Theater at Chistiye Prudy set off a series of arrests by police. **John Freedman**

A couple of weeks ago a twist of fate made me a player in a production created by Donatas Grudovich. It was a show called "Disco Dictatorship: We Will Live to See Endorphins in Nameless Anonymity," and it included scenes of police abuse and other topical themes. Who knew then that Grudovich would soon find himself a key player in a show "staged" by the police?

I ran into the actor-director on Tuesday afternoon on Chistoprudny Bulvar. He was walking around scoping the area as a low-key, impromptu political gathering went on around us. Young people who had been chased by riot police from Staraya Ploshchad near Kitai-Gorod hours before had moved here to sit beneath a statue of Kazakh poet Abai Kunanbayev and sing songs by Viktor Tsoi and Yury Shevchuk.

I hailed Grudovich and asked what was up. I knew his Partisan Theater was supposed to conduct a street performance earlier in the day, but I had looked all over the boulevard without seeing any trace of them.

Grudovich said the schedule had been pushed back from 3 p.m. and that his group would now begin about 6 p.m. at the monument to playwright Alexander Griboyedov near the Chistiye Prudy metro station. I asked whether his wandering troupe would make it as far as where we were standing by the statue of Kunanbayev and, with a laugh, he said, "If they don't arrest me first."

Ha-ha.

The boulevard was circled by dozens of police vans, some filled with riot police in full gear, some empty, waiting to swallow up potential arrest victims. Despite alternating periods of pouring rain, the atmosphere was festive, although everyone knew that could change at any moment. Grudovich, furthermore, knew what I could not at that moment — that his guerrilla street theater performance might not be to the liking of the authorities.

Performance time. Roughly 6:40 p.m. Grudovich and his crew emerge alongside a stage next to the statue of Griboyedov. They are in futuristic, all-black gear, their heads and faces covered in the kinds of knitted masks terrorists might wear. They carry distorting mirrors of various shapes and sizes, and, as they head down the boulevard, they aggressively chant odd strings of words, such as, ["Black-white. Nameless. Something entirely different grows!"](#) or ["We live in Moscow, we are trapped and everyone can see it!"](#)

The quiet protesters at the other end of the boulevard didn't realize that there were theatrical events scheduled and the closer Partisan Theater comes to the protesters, the more the latter grow concerned. Is this a provocation? Are these skinheads or thugs? Are these representatives of pro-Putin youth group Nashi?

A visibly concerned protester hurries around instructing people to ignore the antagonistic people in black and get back to singing and chatting aimlessly. Photographers, of which there are swarms, horde around Grudovich and his actors, laughing, frowning, harrumphing and questioning what is going on — all the while taking pictures and [video](#) in a frenzy.

"Very strange!" one photographer said to me in confusion. "It's a theater," I responded. "It's a performance." He immediately ran back to the cluster of people around Grudovich and began snapping photos again.

As the Partisan Theater troupe turned and headed back to the stage where they began their procession, I returned to the protesters. You see, there was another stage being built next to them and another theater — Nikolai Roshchin's ARTO company — was scheduled to begin the first of two performances in about 90 minutes. I was curious to see how preparations were coming.

As Partisan Theater was completing its performance, riot police arrested two of the actors and stormed into the group's dressing room in a tent and confiscated props and other belongings. Grudovich, speaking to me Wednesday, explained that he was still on stage completing his performance when he saw riot police haul his two colleagues away. Grudovich

and Tupyseva both pointed out that they were able to free their colleagues within two hours and later retrieved the theater's confiscated belongings.

But the damage was done. Patience was running out. The clock was ticking. The arrests of the two Partisan Theater actors set in motion a mass action by the police that, within a quarter of an hour, would bring chaos to Chistiye Prudy.

At approximately 8 p.m. plainclothes policemen quietly approached Nikolai Roshchin, whose ARTO company was preparing to preview segments of a new show called "Theater and its Double" after two weeks of rehearsals and preparations.

"People came to us," Roshchin told me Wednesday, "and said, 'We are preparing to break up the demonstration,' and they instructed us to close down our performance. They asked, 'Who are you with?' because they thought we were part of the protest."

Indeed, according to Roshchin, some members of the technical team building the stage were arrested along with their equipment. They were taken to the Basmanny Court and later released.

Soon after, I saw hundreds of individuals walking briskly south, away from both stages. Seconds later, like spooked gazelles, everyone burst into a run. Scores of riot police in helmets, bullet-proof vests and wielding batons were hot on their trail.

Thus ended a day of theater and politics, each blending into the other, on Day Two of President Vladimir Putin's third term in office.

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