

Protests Dominate the 20th MT Theater Awards

By [John Freedman](#)

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Veteran actor Mikhail Yefremov, second from left, takes the best actor award for his turn as a washed up rock star in "Anarchy" at the Sovremennik. **Igor Vereshchagin**

It wasn't present everywhere, as you will see in the following list of the 20th annual Moscow Times theater awards. But it was the season's 800-pound gorilla. It was the topic that, if not present, was prominent for having gone missing. It was the politics of dissent and defense that sprang up around controversial Russian elections in December and March.

It was so big that I break with tradition and move my Person of the Year winner from the traditional anchor position to the lead. Let everything else fall into place after that. And so, read on to see what I considered memorable about the 2011-2012 season.

Person of the Year: The Agitator. Once politics hit the fan following a contested State Duma election in December, everybody did it for or against somebody. The list of stars supporting presidential candidate Vladimir Putin in March was impressive: Armen Dzhigarkhanyan, Oleg

Tabakov, Nikolai Kolyada, Chulpan Khamatova were just a few. The opposition had big guns, too. Prominent actors Sergei Yursky, Alexei Devotchenko and Liya Akhedzhakova were outspoken protesters. The entire collectives of such theaters as Teatr.doc and ARTO — actors, directors, writers — were out en masse at rallies. The Facebook pages and blogs of hundreds of members of the theater community were a hotbed of political commentary. Never have I seen Russian culture so engaged and so polarized.

Time Waits for No One: Natalya Moshina's "Heat" at Praktika Theater. When this play about terrorists who can't get anyone to pay them any mind opened in mid-November, it seemed to capture the spirit of the age: a nation whose populace didn't care where history was headed. Then, oops, history happened. Three weeks later, the controversial Duma election fueled Russia's biggest political demonstrations in 20 years. Overnight, "Heat" was incredibly out of date. I was caught unawares, too. I filed my review before events unfolded. By the time it was published shortly thereafter, I, too, was behind the curve.

Enigma of the Year: Actress Chulpan Khamatova, who sparked massive controversy by making a video supporting Putin's presidential candidacy in February (some speculate it was done under duress); ducked the press for months afterward; claimed in May that she was too busy to follow the huge Occupy Abai protest across the street from the theater where she works; and then in the summer signed an open letter in support of jailed members of the Pussy Riot protest performance, saying the women deserved "mercy" and should be allowed to "return to their children."

Best Disguise: Nikolai Roshchin's production of "The Raven" at ARTO Theater. You think this was a rendition of Carlo Gozzi's 18th-century commedia dell'arte, but you are only partly right. In fact, this performance of a play about two royal brothers who make a mess of their kingdom was a wicked commentary on Russia's ruling tandem of Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin.

Boldest Bard: Kama Ginkas, for Shakespeare's Fools at the Theater Yunogo Zritelya. This *mélange* of scenes from Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth and Richard III distilled the humor and devastation The Bard invariably described so well. And did I see a distinctly political Ginkas wink when this show's cast drove the evil King Richard from the stage to the accompaniment of Ray Charles howling, Hit the road, Jack, and don't you come back no more?

Best Actor: Mikhail Yefremov in "Anarchy," a production of Mike Packer's "tHe dYsFUnCKshOnalZ!" at the Sovremennik Theater. Yefremov was dead-on convincing and gut-wrenchingly funny as a broken-down old rock singer who hasn't come close to losing the "punk" in his spunk.

Best Actresses: Marina Neyolova and Alyona Babenko were sublime as a warring mother-daughter duo in Yekaterina Polovtseva's dramatization of Ingmar Bergman's film script for "Autumn Sonata" at the Sovremennik.

Putting Politics in Your Face: Teatr.doc, with two unabashedly political broadsides in Yelena Gremina's "Two In Your House," a look at a Belarussian presidential candidate confined to house arrest, and Varvara Faer's "BerlusPutin," an adaptation of Dario Fo's "The Two-Headed Anomaly," which offers a story about a terrorist attack, after which half of former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's brain is transplanted into what is left of Vladimir

Putin's skull.

Classic Elegance: Mindaugas Karbauskis' production of "Talents and Admirers" at the Mayakovsky Theater. This luxurious, finely finessed interpretation of Alexander Ostrovsky's classic backstage drama was beautifully balanced — equal parts contemporary sensibility and time-honored theatrical tradition.

Reinvented Classic: Viktor Ryzhakov's "Pushkin's Little Tragedies" at the Satirikon Theater. This stirring, bracing piece reshuffled and radically reimagined five short dramatic texts by the great Russian poet.

Classic Demolition: Dmitry Krymov's "Gorki-10" at the School of Dramatic Art deconstructed and virtually destroyed several socialist realist plays from the Soviet era while managing to be a visually stunning and emotionally moving work of theater.

New Drama Grows Up: Sasha Denisova's "Day of Dust" at the Playwright and Director Center. Denisova is one of the most recent writers to make a splash in the territory that we lazily still call New Drama. This sensitive play unblinkingly takes on what happens when young rebels mature (or don't).

No Guarantee: Dmitry Bykov's "The Bear" at the Contemporary Play School. Bykov is a bona fide celebrity thanks to the wickedly barbed poetic political parodies he wrote for the Citizen Poet series of videos. Thus, when news came he had penned a play called "The Bear," we licked our chops. (For those without knowledge of Russian, the word for bear is "medved," and the name of Russia's president at the time is Medvedev.) In fact, this toothless, clawless comedy was more sleep aid than satire.

Best Historical Play: Yury Klavdiyev's powerful "The Ruins" at the Playwright and Director Center. This was, to my knowledge, the first time in a decade that a major playwright reconsidered the experience of World War II. Klavdiyev did it by employing his trademark audacity, telling the story of a woman who keeps her children alive by feeding them the meat of bodies that dropped dead during the Leningrad blockade.

Best Play: Ivan Vyrypayev's "Illusions" at Praktika Theater. Directed by Vyrypayev himself, this play about romantic entanglements that may or may not have affected two couples over a lifetime was delicate and wise. It had a classical cleanliness to it, even as it played beautifully on hip, modern turns of language and sensibilities.

Bigger Is Not Better: Janosz Szas' dramatization of Mikhail Bulgakov's novel "The Master and Margarita" at the Chekhov Moscow Art Theater. This wannabe blockbuster was mostly blockheaded and busted.

Best Production: Pavel Pryazhko's "The Soldier," directed by Dmitry Volkostrelov for Teatr.doc and Post Theater of St. Petersburg. And I'm serious. This show about a soldier confronting a moral dilemma while at home on leave consists of two spoken sentences and lasts 15 minutes. It was the most perfectly realized and deeply considered piece of theater I saw this season.

New Kid on the Block: Volkostrelov. This young graduate of Lev Dodin's directing class in St.

Petersburg was all over the Moscow landscape this year, bringing in shows on tour, participating in workshops, and staging the stunning "The Soldier" at Teatr.doc. He has a sensibility like no one else, an artistic touch that is fresh, and a sense of purpose that inspires deep confidence in, and high hopes for, his future.

Masterful Veteran: Yury Lyubimov, who celebrated liberation from his give-or-take 45-year career at the Taganka Theater at age 94 by mounting a fascinating dramatization of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel "The Demons" at the Vakhtangov Theater.

Trend of the Year: In truth, it was the intrusion of politics on culture. But enough of that! There was another important development I want to honor instead: genre busting. This season saw myriad efforts to find new ways to make theater and bring the public to it. Joseph Beuys Theater's Breaking Down Barriers project continued to blur the line between politics, sociology, history and theater; the International Memorial Society joined with Joseph Beuys and Teatr.doc to organize the fascinating Drama of Memory project, wherein archival documents were staged theatrically on the society's new Fourth Theater stage; the Playwright and Director Center continued hosting periodical workshops of experimental readings open to the public; the new Polytheater mounted performances of poetry and biographical texts; the Platform Project at Winzavod offered rehearsals open to the public and other nontraditional events intended to break down barriers in art. I wager this all will contribute to Moscow theater looking drastically different in five years' time.

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