The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Remembering Pyotr Fomenko

By John Freedman

August 10, 2012



The superlatives will flow. The death of director Pyotr Fomenko at the age of 80 on Thursday will unleash a torrent of beautiful, respectful, praiseful, loving words.

I cannot possibly do anything but join the chorus.

Fomenko was, perhaps, the most beloved theater director of his generation in Russia. His best productions challenged those of us who wrote about them to find ever new ways of describing elegant perfection.

When I think of Fomenko I think of subtle smells and delicate sounds. Fomenko always challenged his audience to attune itself to subtleties, to the kinds of details that we ignore in everyday life. It was one of many ways that his work lifted us above the mundane.

I can still recall the rich scent of fresh, peeled oranges in Olga Mukhina's "Tanya-Tanya" at Fomenko's own Fomenko Studio in 1996. As I can smell the fragrant talc that cascaded down through a chute under the ceiling onto the stage and the audience in his scintillating

production of Fernand Crommelynck's "The Magnanimous Cuckold" on the small stage of the Satirikon in 1994.

Fomenko could get more out of a rustling dress or the clinking of glasses than any director I have known.

The reason, I suspect, was the depth of wisdom and experience that went into everything he did. There was never a random element in a Fomenko production. He filled every one of his actors' gestures and intonations with meaning. He had a stunning and complete command of his profession that was rivaled only by his extraordinary feel for life.

According to an acquaintance of mine who studied with Fomenko at the Moscow Art Theater school in the early 1950s, a friend of Fomenko's once bet he could not stop traffic on Tverskaya Ulitsa. Rising to the challenge, Fomenko walked on his hands all the way from Pushkin Square to what is now the mayor's office, where he proceeded to lay out a row of vials filled with alcohol from one side of the street to the other.

Needless to say, traffic came to a halt on Tverskaya.

Not counting that marvelously spontaneous and untitled performance, Pyotr Fomenko debuted as a director in 1958 with Konstantin Finn's "A Troubled Legacy" at the Malaya Bronnaya Theater in Moscow. Through his final production, "Triptych" in 2009, he staged over 60 plays, including a rendition of Alexander Ostrovsky's "The Forest" at the Comedie Francaise in Paris in 2003. He directed three feature films and made 10 films for television.

Fomenko's path in life and art was anything but easy.

Unable to find regular work in Moscow in the 1970s, he spent most of the decade toiling at the Leningrad Theater of Comedy. The 80s were even more complex for him — he could not find a permanent place of employment at any theater and ended up spending most of his time teaching directing and acting at GITIS, the State Institute of Theater Arts.

His work at GITIS changed his life. A group of students that Fomenko gathered in the late 1980s began showing such promise that most became stars even before they graduated in 1992. On the strength of this group Fomenko was given the opportunity to keep the entire class together in a professional theater that took its name from his studio at GITIS — the Pyotr Fomenko Studio.

Even though it still lacked a physical home and had to perform on rented stages around the city, the Fomenko Studio immediately became one of Moscow's most popular and respected theaters.

Beginning at the turn of the 21st century, and now occupying two small stages in an old Stalin-era apartment building not far from the Poklonnaya Gora monument, Fomenko turned out a string of hit productions that included "One Absolutely Happy Village" (2000), "Family Happiness" (2000), "The Mad Woman from Chaillot" (2001), "War and Peace" (2001) and "Egyptian Nights" (2002). These shows won countless awards and frequently toured the stages of Europe, where Fomenko became one of Russia's best-known cultural ambassadors.

Fomenko's production of Chekhov's "Three Sisters" in 2004 was, perhaps, the greatest work of his final decade. Sweeping and delicate at the same time, it was a deeply tragic piece that focused relentlessly on the human penchant for folly and failure. It was performed on rented stages for four years until the spectacular new home of the Fomenko Studio's large stage was opened on Taras Shevchenko Naberezhnaya in 2008.

Fomenko had a way of creating shows that I, along with thousands of others, related to as if they were personal messages, bits of wisdom or insight offered in a hushed whisper and with a wink. I felt as though I breathed more deeply, felt more acutely and heard more sensitively when I attended a Fomenko production. He was a master of exploring human emotions and was quite capable of driving audiences to tears of joy and sadness, although there wasn't a sentimental bone in his body.

The pangs of remorse and the sighs of joy Pyotr Fomenko inspired in us were always rich, deep, meaningful and real.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/08/10/remembering-pyotr-fomenko-a34343