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Fomenko's Death Is This August's Tragedy

By Alexei Bayer

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The worst calamities tend to befall Russia in August. It's been called the month of disasters, but it is rather a month of shrinkage. It seems that every August, Russia is diminished — in size, reputation and stature — both in the eyes of its own citizens and internationally.

In August 1991, a failed coup by Communist hard-liners reduced the Soviet political police and its repressive apparatus to paper tigers, while also setting in motion the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The financial crisis of 1998 put an end to hopes that Russia could reform its economy, and, in retrospect, the appointment of Vladimir Putin as prime minister a year later did the same for the country's political system.

Since then, August disasters have poked holes in the notion that Russia has a functioning police and government. August 2008 saw an army that had once crushed Hitler celebrate the defeat of tiny Georgia. In 2010, peat fires burning out of control turned Moscow, quite literally, into a vision of the apocalypse.

Now, a kangaroo court has put three members of punk group Pussy Riot away for two years, confirming that Russia's justice system and religious establishment are a bunch of buffoons.

But perhaps the greatest loss was the death, at 80, of theater director Pyotr Fomenko. Along with nonagenarian Yury Lyubimov, Fomenko was the brightest light of Russian theater and one of the last symbols of an era.

In the Soviet Union, the theater was the most effective platform for independent thinking and artistic freedom. The dissident movement was isolated, the typewritten works of literature known as samizdat reached only a handful of readers, and a KGB crackdown in the second half of the 1970s jailed or pushed abroad most dissidents, along with nonconformist artists and writers. Cinema, television and newspapers were tightly controlled, and literature was severely censored.

Theater, on the other hand, was small-scale enough to be able to sometimes fly under the radar of ideological monitoring. It became the only place where artistic experimentation could survive and where art could comment on Soviet political realities even while presenting such approved Russian classics as Gogol's "Inspector General" and Chekhov's "Cherry Orchard," as well as works about the Bolshevik Revolution such as John Reed's "Ten Days that Shook the World." Lyubimov's small, cozy Taganka Theater was a cult in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Its sold-out audiences sat on the edge of their seats, eagerly catching incandescent Aesopean allusions to contemporary reality tumbling from the stage.

Fomenko's first production, the 1967 staging of Vladimir Mayakovsky's "Mystery Bouffe" in Leningrad, had just three performances before being banned by the city's party bosses. Yet after a period of official disfavor, Fomenko was allowed to go back to work. Only in the theater could such an independent and uncompromising artist attain national fame in the Soviet Union.

The Soviet theater was very different from the way theater developed in the West in the 20th century. Its political message and its role in society far transcended anything seen in Western Europe, Britain or the United States. Its artistic flowering was the result of special circumstances that made the theater the conscience of the Russian intelligentsia.

Today, the theater seems unlikely to play a significant part in the nascent Russian protest movement. It has been replaced by the Internet and social networks. With the death of its last remaining major directors, the Russian theater seems even more destined for a decline. Never again will it bring together like-minded people thrilling at the sight of the artist outwitting the censor.

Alexei Bayer, a native Muscovite, is a New York-based economist.

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