The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Brit Empowers Kids and Convicts With Theater

By Jonathan Earle

September 03, 2012



Alex Dower's company Creating Freedom creates theater with prisoners, orphans and crime victims. He worked with a Moscow center last week. **Sebastian Lister**

On his first trip to Russia three years ago, Alex Dower directed a group of inmates from Colony 29 in Perm in three short plays, including Isaac Babel's "My First Goose."

Some time later, he received a letter from the warden confirming what he already knew about the power of theater to change lives.

"Your truly noble mission has given [the prisoners] a chance to believe in themselves," the warden wrote. "You were able to show everybody that human potential is unlimited; all that's needed is a nudge in the right direction."

Dower heads "Creating Freedom: Theater for Transformation," a London-based theater, film and educational company that works around the world in prisons, orphanages, refugee camps

and with disabled people and victims of crime.

He was back in Russia last week directing a group of disadvantaged children in a performance of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Nightingale," which tells the story of a Chinese emperor who prefers the tinkling of a mechanical bird to the song of a real nightingale. The emperor learns the error of his ways on his death bed when the nightingale's song brings him back to life.

Dower hopes that the children of the Otradnoye Center will gain confidence and perspective from the experience of acting, just like the prisoners.

"Acting requires you to think the character's thoughts. You can think anything and be anything. It brings a new perspective to your own reality, broadens horizons and empowers those in difficult circumstances," he said before a rehearsal last week.

The performance featured about a dozen children, aged 8 to 18, as well as parents and staff members. The children's delight was evident during the rehearsal.

The emperor, a chubby, blond-haired boy, who wore a red T-shirt that said "Tsar. Just tsar," bellowed orders at the emperor's servants, whose meek foot-shuffling drew giggles from the other actors.

A spindly, little girl with deep-set eyes and a page-boy haircut played an imaginary gong at one point. "Bong!" she said, returning to her chair with a satisfied grin.

"The children love working with Alex. They feel needed and trusted. He finds a way to work with each one," said Yulia Pavlovna, who acted in the play with her son Igor, who has cerebral palsy.

Marina Sheludyakova, 17, who played the storyteller, said she'd never acted before. "It's really interesting. I think it makes everybody more outgoing," she said.

The children weren't that different from the prisoners, Dower said. "They both have this Russian intensity, this dedication, focus and commitment," he said. "The best actors are the ones that have never thought about acting. Their acting is clean of purposes like wanting to impress or be famous."

The play isn't Dower's last play in Russia. He hopes to do another, longer-term project at the center and a new staging in a Russian prison.

Correction: An earlier version of this story included a description of acting's therapeutic effects that was erroneously presented as a direct quote.

See www.alexdower.com for more about Creating Freedom.

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