

Theater Plus: Lyubimovka Play Fest to Uncover New Voices

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Lyubimovka is a pig in a poke. It's always been that way and it always will.

Lyubimovka, you see, is a festival that presents readings of new plays. If this year is anything like the past, some plays will be so new they won't be finished yet. Writers may still be scribbling fresh dialogue in the margins as actors head out onto the tiny basement stage at Teatr.doc, which has hosted the festival for several years now.

In fact, following the customarily frank discussions that occur after each reading, some of those writers might head back to the drawing board and start all over again from scratch. Some may just discard their work in despair. Or, as has happened often enough, some of the plays may be snatched up to become The Next Big Thing. Oblivion and burgeoning fame have both been frequent visitors at Lyubimovka over the years.

The 2012 version of the festival is smaller than past renditions. Still, it will likely provide

plenty of food for thought in the theater community. Running Monday through Sunday, it will introduce audiences to 15 new plays participating in the competition segment, and seven new non-competition plays by established writers.

At Lyubimovka, of course, the play is the thing. The whole purpose of this festival, founded in 1990, was to help emerging writers and established theaters find each other. It has always been strictly about the play — texts are read simply by actors standing in place or seated on chairs, and the conversations and arguments that rage throughout the festival are rarely about anything other than the plays at hand.

And yet, ever since the festival moved a decade ago from Konstantin Stanislavsky's verdant Lyubimovka estate outside of Moscow to the hot, airless space at Teatr.doc, there has been another star invariably in attendance. That would be The Spectator. What an astonishing and motley crew of mad enthusiasts that cram their way into the events! If you think the Red Line on the metro at rush hour is bad, try to get yourself a seat at Lyubimovka sometime!

The basement space at Teatr.doc comfortably seats 40, maybe 50, spectators on a couple of benches, a few rows of folding chairs and some pillows on a windowsill. Last year, most events were attended by 80 to 100 people. One drew a crowd of 145. That didn't count the folks I saw outside following events through an open window.

Whether the plays are good or bad, whether tomorrow they will be forgotten or will change the world, they all share the aroma of the here and now. Many drip with the blood of politics. In fact, that has become a traditional aspect of Lyubimovka: giving public airing to social and political themes that get short shrift in Russia's mainstream media.

I don't know — because I can't know until it happens — but I would expect this year's festival to be even more politicized than usual.

But let me go further.

The unleashing of protest in Russia following the controversial State Duma elections in December is, in my humble opinion, in part due to the brave liberties that Teatr.doc and Lyubimovka have taken over the years. When I attended that first spontaneous protest on Dec. 5 at Chistiye Prudy, I was taken aback. The 8,000 protesters there were almost exclusively in their teens or twenties, just like the audiences at Teatr.doc. They had the same questioning look in their eyes, the same sense of purpose.

Lyubimovka and Teatr.doc have tirelessly educated a generation of young people in the art of public discourse. I can't prove it, but I don't doubt it: The unexpected, almost exponential growth of the protest movement over the last 10 months in Moscow is due in part to activities at Teatr.doc such as the Lyubimovka festival. The readings of probing new plays at Lyubimovka attract a thinking young audience, encourage them to develop their own voices and provide them the faith that those voices can be heard.

Still, what gives Lyubimovka its lasting power is the contribution it has made to the art of theater over the years. Writers such as Olga Mukhina, Oleg Bogayev, Maksym Kurochkin, Yury Klavdiyev, Vasily Sigarev and many more have gone on to attain international recognition after their plays were presented at the festival.

Two highlights in this year's group are sure to be readings of new plays by Pavel Pryazhko and Yaroslava Pulinovich, both of whom have had major successes at Lyubimovka in the past. Pryazhko's "Three Days in Hell" will be read on Saturday and will be followed by a full-fledged performance of his play "I Am Free," as staged by Dmitry Volkostrelov for the Post Theater of St. Petersburg. Pulinovich's "How I Became" concludes the festival on Sunday evening.

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Teatr.doc is located at 11/13 Tryokhprudny Pereulok, Bldg. 1. A map can be accessed at the bottom right corner of the theater's website. (<http://www.teatrdoc.ru/>) Below is the complete schedule for the festival as published on its website. (<http://www.lubimovka.ru/>)

Sept. 3

5 p.m.: "Regional Center, or, City of Angels" by Igor Ignatov. Directed by Mikhail Mokeyev.

7 p.m.: "Detour" by Glafira Skorokhodova. Directed by Talgat Batalov.

9 p.m.: "Every Day" by Olga Darfy. Directed by Irina Vilkova.

Sept. 4

3 p.m.: "Presentation" by Ksenia Dragunskaya. Directed by Ruslan Malikov.

5 p.m.: "Keds" by Lyubov Strizhak. Directed by Valentin Samokhin.

7 p.m.: Day of Documentary Projects: "Nine Months, 40 Weeks" by Alexei Kulichkov and Sergei Shevchenko. "Kidnap" by Konstantin Kozhevnikov. Directed by Alexei Bogachuk-Petukhov. Dramaturged by Yekaterina Bondarenko.

Sept. 5

3 p.m.: "The Suicide Club" by Veronika Aktanova and Lyusya Gvaramadze. Directed by Olesya Nevmerzhitskaya.

5 p.m.: "Kulshichi" by Ksenia Zhukova. Directed by Filipp Los.

7 p.m.: "The Incident at the New Kostroma Station" by Vladimir Zabaluyev and Alexei Zenzinov. Directed by Konstantin Soldatov.

9 p.m.: "Labor Campers" by Valery Shergin. Directed by Ksenia Zorina.

Sept. 6

3 p.m.: "L" by Yevgeny Babushkin. Directed by Aglaya Romanovskaya.

5 p.m.: "As If Alive" by Maria Zelinskaya. Directed by Filipp Los.

7 p.m.: "One's Own Land" by Alexander Arkhipov. Directed by Yury Kvyatkovsky.

9 p.m.: "Sacred Faces" by Viktoria Dergachyova. Directed by Yelena Roman.

Sept. 7

3 p.m.: "My Defense" by Gulnara Akhmetzyanova. Directed by Svetlana Medvedeva.

5 p.m.: "The Quiet Rustle of Disappearing Steps" by Dmitry Bogoslavsky. Directed by Alexei Razmakhov.

7 p.m.: "The Rules of Melodrama" by Yulia Yakovleva. Directed by Sergei Aronin.

9 p.m.: "Nesting Dolls on the Curve of the Earth" by Yekaterina Narshi. Directed by Veronika Rodionova.

Sept. 8

2 p.m.: Round Table Discussion: "Social Project and Theater."

5:30 p.m.: "Three Days in Hell" by Pavel Pryazhko. Directed by Anton Pakhomov.

7:30 p.m.: Performance of "I Am Free" by Pavel Pryazhko. Directed by Dmitry Volkostrellov for the Post Theater of St. Petersburg.

9:30 p.m.: "A Time to Be Ashes" by Konstantin Steshik. Directed by Irina Volkova.

Sept. 9

2 p.m.: "My Father the Computer" by Maria Boteva. Directed by Alexei Kuzmin-Tarasov.

4 p.m.: "Swamp" by Marina Krapivina. Directed by Yekaterina Korabelnik.

6 p.m.: "Femen'ism" by Dan Gumenny. Directed by Gleb Cherepanov.

8 p.m.: "How I Became" by Yaroslava Pulinovich. Directed by Oleg Larchenko.

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