

Praise Enough for Lyubimovka 2012

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When the final event of this year's Lyubimovka play festival wrapped up Sunday night after a reading of Yaroslava Pulinovich's "How I Became," you could almost hear a huge, collective sigh of relief. Everybody — actors, directors, organizers, writers, guests and spectators — had been living on the edge for an entire week.

Mikhail Ugarov, the artistic director at Teatr.doc, the festival's venue, approached me Saturday afternoon looking just a bit worse for wear. It was so obvious that a woman standing next to us reached out and straightened his collar.

"Misha, you're looking a bit haggard," she said with motherly concern.

Next year, Ugarov will be able to take it easier. As announced Sunday night, Ugarov and his wife and partner Yelena Gremina will pass the responsibility for running future festivals to playwright Mikhail Durnenkov.

For as long as it takes a Lyubimovka festival to run — sometimes it's eight or nine days, this

year it was a slightly more merciful seven — everybody involved is in over his or her head. Events begin as early as 2 p.m. and routinely run to midnight. What happens before 2 p.m. and after midnight is what determines what we see during "working hours." It's a 24/7 thing.

Some of the plays presented will last, most will not. For the record, a few of those generating talk this year were: "Presentation" by Ksenia Dragunskaya; "Nine Months, 40 Weeks" by Alexei Kulichkov and Sergei Shevchenko; a project called "Kidnap" conceived by Konstantin Kozhevnikov with literary assistance from Yekaterina Bondarenko; "Labor Campers" by Valery Shergin; "One's Own Land" by Alexander Arkhipov; "Plant Eaters" by Maksym Kurochkin; and "Three Days in Hell" by Pavel Pryazhko.

This is interesting and important, but it's not what compels me to write today. Today I am moved to consider the people who fill the small hall at Teatr.doc for each reading.

Not all readings cram 150 people into the tiny black basement as did those of plays by Kurochkin, Pryazhko and Pulinovich. I counted around 80 at a presentation of Lyubov Strizhak's "Keds" on Tuesday and about the same for "Femen'ism" by Dan Gumenny on Sunday. But what you must keep in mind is that the official capacity for shows at Teatr.doc is probably around 50.

If you haven't been to Lyubimovka I can imagine you scoffing. "Fifty people? One hundred and fifty? Why, that's nobody at all."

But it's not the numerical figures — it is the energy, the enthusiasm and the commitment that spectators bring to these events. Moreover, I would guess that the overall number of individuals putting in at least one appearance at the sum total of the events exceeds 500. It may go much higher. People come and go, but the house at the theater remains packed. If you don't leave a coat or a notebook on your seat when you go out for the break after a reading you might as well not bother coming back in. There's someone else lurking in the cramped foyer just waiting to snatch your place.

Audiences at Lyubimovka are famous for being highly opinionated. Nobody fears sending a verbal punch to the chops of a writer or director whose work has just been shown.

Following the reading of "Femen'ism," actress Irina Vilкова flatly stated, "That was bad. I didn't like anything. Not the play, not the directing, not the acting."

This is expected and, I would emphasize, it is appreciated. Everybody at Lyubimovka values an honest opinion, the playwrights most of all.

The discontent displayed Saturday evening at Dmitry Volkostrelov's staging of Pavel Pryazhko's "I Am Free" was palpable. It began when this small hour-long "performance" was just 10 or 15 minutes old. It began with grumbling, followed by spectators speaking out and then whole groups of people stifling or not stifling laughter before some of them began leaving. They were confused and unconvinced by this piece that consisted of Volkostrelov standing in front of the audience with his computer and conducting a virtually silent slide show that had been prepared by Pryazhko. The few lines he did have only served to throw oil on the fire of discontent.

Afterwards spectators were indignant, bemused or disgusted. A few of us were intrigued, but powerless against the angry wave of annoyance.

Opinions were split more evenly after Anton Pakhomov's presentation of Pryazhko's play "Three Days in Hell" two hours earlier. Moderator Kristina Matviyenko declared that this was Pryazhko's "most socially-oriented play" ever. A speaker from the audience, a literary scholar, declared the opposite. She said the play experimented with language and insisted, "The social aspect in this play exists only in the margins."

This comment drew applause from the crowd, suggesting many supported it.

The writer Alexander Zheleztssov, standing in a doorway, admitted he left the hall during the reading because he ran out of patience with its almost claustrophobic depictions of life's banal details. But, he admitted, something enticed him back into the hall for the discussion, where he had a revelation.

"This was a play about death and dying," he said. "I didn't realize that until just now. A dying person's scope of vision is reduced. He just sees the number of the bus he's trying to catch. He sees nothing else."

People also took sides following the reading of Shergin's "Labor Campers" on Wednesday. Some found it too long, others found it too slick, still others claimed it was a ready-made hit. One thing everyone agreed upon was that it was a sad and very funny story: a group of naïve people encounters a man who makes his living by smuggling people out of a totalitarian state then selling them back whence they came.

An unscheduled reading of Kurochkin's "Plant Eaters" at 11 p.m. on Thursday matched the reading of Pryazhko's "Three Days in Hell" for the largest number of people crammed into a hall not made to receive them. But, as has become a tradition at Lyubimovka, it was also the closest thing to a lovefest we saw all week long. Festival Art Director Yelena Kovalskaya was even compelled at one point during the discussion to admonish the audience.

"All right, enough of the praise," she said, only partly in jest, "who's going to find fault with the play?"

Oh, a few suggestions followed. Someone suggested it was too short. Someone else thought the characters could be filled out. Another suggested Kurochkin is too worshipful of women: "You ought to give your women some flaws, they're too perfect," he said.

A student from the Russian Academy of Theater Arts wondered about the play's humor: "Your play was very funny," he told Kurochkin, "but I don't know why. Can you explain why your play was funny?"

"I think it's because most writers satirize other people," Kurochkin said, "but in my plays I make fun of myself."

But what prevailed that evening, aside from praise or constructive criticism, was the deep and abiding affection the public has for Kurochkin and his work. This writer has presented new work at most of the Lyubimovka festivals and it has reached the point where Lyubimovka without Kurochkin would be a disappointment in itself.

Indeed, his "Plant Eaters" was an odd and only partially accessible work, at least for those of us hearing it for the first time. It involved a princess from a bandit-filled country and her search for good sex, as well as for her stash of gold that was stolen and then recovered, although no one cares about it anymore by that time.

That surely is a pathetic description of the play, but, as the student said, it was hilarious. Throughout the short reading the audience was beside itself with laughter, electric bursts of it following each other at short intervals the entire time.

The fact of the matter is that praise, derision, laughter or groans are not the point at Lyubimovka. What matters are the connections that happen, plus or minus. All are to the good, because all represent a public plugged into the festival's efforts to encourage the search for new art and the sharing of diverse opinions.

Somebody else will add up the "successes" and the "failures" of Lyubimovka 2012. I will state my point of view right here: It was a triumph again because, once again, it got people involved.

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