

Happy 95th Birthday, Yury Lyubimov!

By [John Freedman](#)

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Yury Lyubimov got something of a late start in the profession that made him famous. He was 42 when he staged his first production at the Vakhtangov Theater. He was 47 when he founded the world famous Taganka Theater.

Who would have known then that by his 95th birthday — that is today, Sept. 30 — he would still be going full speed ahead as he enters his second season since leaving behind the Taganka following a huge blowup and falling out with his actors in the summer of 2011?

A few facts and dates can put this extraordinary man's life into perspective.

Lyubimov was 5 weeks old when the October Revolution unfolded in Petrograd and throughout Russia. He was a member of Mikhail Chekhov's Second Moscow Art Theater from 1934 to 1936, after which he entered the troupe at the Vakhtangov Theater. During World War II, Lyubimov met and befriended Dmitry Shostakovich and a host of other great Russian artists in the most incongruous of circumstances. They all worked in an organization called the Song and Dance Ensemble of the NKVD, that is, of the Soviet secret police.

At some point during the 1930s, Lyubimov met and had a brief chat with Vsevolod Meyerhold, the great Russian avant-garde director.

This is what Lyubimov told me about that encounter in an interview I did with him in 1988 for a small journal called *Soviet and East-European Drama, Theatre and Film*.

"I was introduced to Meyerhold when I was a student actor," Lyubimov said. "Meyerhold came to watch us at the Vakhtangov, and he was taken with the way I was doing pantomime. Ruben Simonov, the theater's director at the time, called me over to introduce me to him. Meyerhold said to me, 'never forget about movement. It is a great thing, young man. The body is as expressive as the word. Train yourself. Spend your whole life in training.' And that is what I have done."

I have heard some question whether this meeting ever happened. Nonsense. Of course it did. In some way or some manner. Maybe not exactly the way Lyubimov remembered it to me in 1988 or in other ways to others in later years. But the passing of the torch surely occurred. It is too perfect an event for it not to have happened. Lyubimov essentially was the next great experimental director to emerge in Russia after Meyerhold was arrested in 1939 and murdered in the basement of the Lubyanka in 1941.

There are other impressive numbers.

Lyubimov throughout the years has staged well over 100 dramas and operas. As an actor he performed in 37 plays and 17 films. It's true that the number of film roles was relatively small, although several remain classics today.

His performance of Moliere in Anatoly Efros' "A Few Words in Defense of Monsieur de Moliere," a film made for television in 1975, was one of the great achievements of the Soviet 1970s. His interpretation of the corrupt and groveling prime minister in the fairy tale "Cain XVIII" in 1963 is simply one of the funniest performances I know of in Soviet film. His first [appearance](#) when greeting a visiting queen after pushing open the castle gates with his belly is a master class of comic detail.

Both the Vakhtangov and the Taganka are marking today's anniversary by offering up Lyubimov productions, appropriately enough, one being one of his oldest works and the other being his most recent.

The Taganka will perform the director's famous "The Good Person of Szechwan," the play by Bertolt Brecht with which the theater was founded in 1964. This, of course, is a new version with an entirely new cast, but it still has distinct echoes reverberating back almost 50 years.

On bill at the Vakhtangov is Lyubimov's dramatization of Fyodor Dostoevsky's "Demons," staged just this spring. In it one [sees](#) the same aesthetic that Lyubimov has developed and employed throughout his directing career — the use of large casts moving about the stage with choreographic precision, and single actors emerging from the crowd to appeal directly to the audience.

There is more to come, however. Lyubimov's latest opus, a staging of Alexander Borodin's classic opera "Prince Igor" is slated to open at the Bolshoi Theater in mid-December.

One suspects that there is still work ahead at the Vakhtangov. According to an Izvestia [report](#) about a news conference held Friday, Vakhtangov artistic director Rimas Tuminas declared that he fully expects to celebrate Lyubimov's 105th birthday at the theater.

Radio Liberty also [reported](#) on that news conference, quoting Lyubimov on his own artistic legacy.

"It's a theater that I created and which is famous throughout the whole world. It's a Russian art, not some sort of French [art]. People tried to stick me with the label of political theater. But that's wrong. I was engaged in an aesthetic, in the expansion of the palette — what shades could be added in working with space and style."

If that's a question, my answer is: "Quite a few."

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