

20 Years of Theater in The Moscow Times

By [John Freedman](#)

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The Moscow Times

We are in the middle of celebrations of the 20th anniversary of The Moscow Times as a daily newspaper. It's rather amazing, actually. Very few among us who were there for the beginning thought further than the next issue and the next story. I guarantee you that no one, not even founder Derk Sauer, was thinking about what might be lurking down the road 20 years on.

I have no doubt that everyone who cares has his or her own image of The Moscow Times and what it means. Some great journalists at this paper have covered politics, social developments and business over the decades. There were incredible, even historic, reports from the front lines of coups, from the front lines of wars, from backrooms where political or politically motivated deals were cut.

If they're honest, such major media outlets as the New York Times, CNN, BBC and many others will admit that many of their reports originating in Moscow began when their correspondent picked up the morning MT and found ready-made stories looking up

from the newsprint.

One tale I often repeat is offered with all due respect to one of my favorite newspapers, the Los Angeles Times. For years I would go home to visit my mother in Southern California for summer vacation and for my first two weeks there I would see reports datelined in Moscow which I had already read in the MT before I left.

But let's be honest, one way or another somebody was going to tell most of those stories in English anyway.

Which brings me, quite selfishly, to my own home turf.

For me, The Moscow Times is the publication that had the nerve and generosity to make Russian theater one of its primary topics. Nobody else would have — could have — provided for English-language readers the extraordinary story of Russian theater experiencing its most explosive, contentious and fruitful era of reinvention and rebirth since the post-revolutionary years in the 1920s. And let's be clear here: Russian theater — for the millions upon millions of people worldwide who live and die by theater — is one of the Holy Grails of the art form.

Anatoly Lunarcharsky, the first Soviet commissar of education, famously called Moscow the world's theatrical Mecca in the 1920s. That has been true again since the late 1990s.

Thanks to The Moscow Times, a record of that development exists in English. Skewed. Biased. Incomplete and probably more than occasionally a bit incompetent. Ninety-nine percent prejudiced in the direction of my personal tastes, flaws, rare strengths and lamentable weaknesses. But it's there to be challenged. It's there to be criticized. It's there to be plundered, reinterpreted and corrected, as all historical records always are. That English-language story of an amazing two decades in the history of a great art form does exist because The Moscow Times made it possible.

There were times when it was clear my coverage of such a frivolous topic had less than staunch support from the editorial board. New editors of various ilk have sought to remake me and my topic in their image. "Where are the interviews with stars?" I have been asked. "You write about entertainment, don't you? Why don't you do a profile on Filipp Kirkorov for us?" asked others.

I was fired during the financial crisis of 1998. With money short, who in the hell wanted to pay for art? To this day, I am grateful to my editor that I was allowed to keep filing copy as a freelancer.

Marc Champion, one of the finest editors-in-chief the paper ever had, saw fit to bring me back when the paper recovered from the blows of the 1998 default. It's true I asked him to bring me back, but his enthusiasm was genuine and immediately apparent. I believe to this day that Marc's understanding that deep cultural coverage is crucial for the prestige of the paper had a lasting effect on those who succeeded him and on those of us who remained after he left.

From time to time, someone tells me that not many MT readers attend the theater. To which I reply that anyone reading the MT in print or online wants to know where the culture is

headed. That's why they're reading us in the first place.

For hundreds of years, theater in Russia has been one of the first places you go to find out what people are thinking and how they are reacting to the world around them. It was that way in the 19th century. It was that way in the 20th century. The 21st century is no different. and I'd like to believe that The Moscow Times will continue to chase the story.

P.S. Just in case anyone failed to understand what I wrote about today, allow me to add one bit more. As I was putting the finishing touches on this piece I happened upon a yellowed clipping of a letter to the editor from Nov. 11, 1992. Here it is in full:

Write More About City Theater Scene

Editor:

This letter is from a Muscovite who bought your newspaper on the street by chance. The issue was read with pleasure.

Being a theater admirer, I especially enjoyed the article by John Freedman about the performance "Woe From Wit" (Oct. 14) at the Chekhov Art Theater. The article contains interesting thoughts and gives the readers a real notion of the staging. The photo illustration seems to be of high quality.

There are a lot of theaters and studios in Moscow and ticket prices are quite high.

I don't like to see performances that have not been professionally reviewed, so I like to get illustrated information about upcoming premieres.

Grigory Fischer

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