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# American Directors in Search of Anton Chekhov

By John Freedman

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**John Freedman**

I first met Curt Columbus in 1990 in Chicago. He was working for Victory Gardens Theater, an important venue for new work in that city, and I was a hanger-on with my wife, who was performing there on tour.

Curt was one of two simultaneous translators who sat in a booth at the back of the hall and for 36 performances over a five-week period he translated live, in real time, as five actors performed Lyudmila Razumovskaya's manic play called "Dear Yelena Sergeyevna" for nearly three hours. It was extraordinarily hard work and Curt was incredibly good at it. To this day my wife Oksana Mysina considers him one of the best acting partners she's ever had.

Since then Curt and I have had a way of running into each other, usually here in Moscow. We did so again last week. I caught up with him on Thursday at the School of Dramatic Art, and I

asked him to sit down and tell me what brought him to town this time.

Curt began by informing me this was his ninth trip to Moscow, his first having come 25 years ago when he studied Russian language at Leningrad State University as a college student on an exchange program.

This time he came in a completely different capacity, however. He is now the artistic director at the prestigious Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, RI, one of the finest regional theaters in the United States. His working partner on this trip is Terry Nolen, the artistic director of the Arden Theatre in Philadelphia, and the two are just beginning to work on a big project involving Anton Chekhov's play "Three Sisters."

Americans are accustomed to perceiving the works of Chekhov through the "lens of the English theater" and that, Curt believes, is a mistake. "I would like to see if we can escape the way Chekhov has been presented in America for a number of years," he explained.

Americans get Chekhov via the "narrow bandwidth" of Stanislavsky, he continued, adding that this leaves him feeling "detached from the original work of Chekhov."

He is not interested in mounting a "historical production of Chekhov," but rather is seeking a "foundation to discuss how we find a contemporary American Chekhov that can explode the way American audiences" have grown used to perceiving the playwright and his works.

With this as their goal, the two directors spent the last week meeting with scholars, directors and actors, and attending productions of plays by Chekhov. Some of the stops on their itinerary included meetings with prominent Chekhov scholars Tatyana Shakh-Azizova and Alevtina Kuzycheva, and directors Viktor Gulchenko and Kama Ginkas, whose dramatization of Chekhov's story "Rothschild's Fiddle" they attended on Wednesday.

"We have met Chekhov here again and again," Curt said.

I concluded by asking how it was that he originally became interested in Russian language and culture. It was for one of the "stupidest reasons in the world," Curt laughed, explaining that it has something to do with his father, Ronald Reagan, and a bit of youthful rebelliousness. To hear his full response, as well as to hear his other comments on the "Three Sisters" project, you can watch this video of our conversation.

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