

# Culture Brings Russia Closer to Britain

By [John Freedman](#)

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**The  Moscow Times**

This image of a scene from Lev Dodin's production of "Platonov" is one of the photographs in Ken Reynolds' "Russian Theatre in Performance," an exhibit at the Pushkin House in London. **Ken Reynolds**

Britain definitely had a thing for Russian culture in November. And there was pretty much something for everyone. The month's events involved the works of numerous Russian film directors, a touring production from a venerable Moscow playhouse, a dramatization of a Russian political and legal scandal, an art exhibit and an exhibit of photographs of Russian theater.

Last week, The Moscow Times [reported](#) on "Gaiety Is the Most Outstanding Feature of the Soviet Union: Art From Russia," an exhibit of 18 artists at the Saatchi Gallery. But there was a lot more than that going on.

Andrei Konchalovsky, the film and theater director who began his career 50 years ago apprenticing with the great Andrei Tarkovsky, belatedly celebrated his 75th birthday with a retrospective festival of his films in numerous cities, a lecture at Oxford and a master class

at Cambridge. Among the films shown were "The Story of Asya Klyachina" (1967), "Uncle Vanya" (1970), "Sibiriade" (1979), "Gloss" (2007) and "The Nutcracker" (2010). Also included were some of the director's Hollywood films, including "Maria's Lovers" (1984), starring Nastassja Kinski, Keith Carradine and Robert Mitchum, and "Runaway Train" (1985) starring Jon Voight.

Alongside Konchalovsky, the Russian Film Festival in London presented the works of over two dozen contemporary directors, ranging from documentaries and experimental works to mainstream entertainment. Cherry-picking titles from a complete schedule published on the Academia Rossica [website](#), I would highlight Vasily Sigarev's "To Live," Alexei Balabanov's "Me Too," Pavel Lungin's "Conductor," and Boris Khlebnikov's "'Til Night Do Us Part."

Meanwhile, across town at the Noel Coward Theatre, Moscow's Vakhtangov Theater was in residence for six days with its award-winning production of "Uncle Vanya." As Kate Mason wrote on the One Stop Arts [website](#), "This 'Uncle Vanya' is not the cosy sort of Chekhov that made his plays British favourites, with their tea, petty conversation and the suffocating ennui of the rural bourgeoisie. In director Rimas Tuminas' production, there is no samovar and not a lace doily in sight."

That said, the responses appear to have been split. Even those leaving comments beneath a negative review by David Nice on [ArtsDesk.com](#) engaged in heated exchanges, some finding the show "self-indulgent" and "unforgivably dull," while others found it "incredible."

"Why is it that people who review Chekhov seem incapable of accepting anything other than realism?" this latter, unidentified commentator asked. "The Arts Desk must get someone else — I won't trust this reviewer ever again!"

Noah Birksted-Breen has made herculean efforts over the last seven years to bring cutting-edge Russian theater to London. His Sputnik Theatre has staged English-language, and sometimes world, premieres of works by important new playwrights Yuri Klavdiyev, Natalya Moshina, Yaroslava Pulinovich and others. Over the last three weeks of November, he presented his latest, a rendition of Yelena Gremina's politically charged docudrama "One Hour Eighteen Minutes," at the Diorama Theatre in London.

"One Hour Eighteen Minutes" tells the story of the demise of Russian muckraking attorney Sergei Magnitsky in prison. It is cobbled together from interviews with, and press reports about, many of the people who were around Magnitsky at the time that he was "allowed to die" from pancreatitis in November 2009. Gremina put together her first version of the play in early 2010, shortly after Magnitsky's death. For the recent London run, Birksted-Breen used an updated and expanded text which is premiering in Moscow now.

Many reviewers and commentators have pointed out the play's importance as an act of civil awareness and social conscience. Tom Stoppard, [speaking](#) after seeing "One Hour Eighteen Minutes" on Nov. 20 pointed out that without the efforts that have been made to keep Magnitsky's name in the news, "this case would have been forgotten, it would have been a dim memory."

Photographer Ken Reynolds opened an exhibit, Russian Theatre in Performance, of his

extraordinary photographs at the Pushkin House in London in mid-November. As explained in promotional material on the Pushkin House [website](#), it features shots "drawn from complete rehearsals and actual performances, never from photo calls; invariably taken from just one position, using very fast black and white film, and never using flash."

Reynolds has a genius for textural images, and it shows in the best of his photos, which use the grain of his ultra high-speed film to capture the soul of theatrical performance. His photos often allow us to glimpse deeply expressive, frozen action — actors flying, spinning, falling, gasping or laughing. The current exhibit presents images of productions by Lev Dodin, Kama Ginkas, Genrietta Yanovskaya, Dmitry Krymov, Boris Yukhananov and nine other prominent directors. "Dodin and Ginkas are the most strongly represented," the photographer wrote to me in an e-mail. The exhibit continues through Dec. 21.

Finally, in a semi-non sequitur, I am pleased to report that Georgian director Robert Sturua has been reinstated as the artistic director at the Rustaveli Theater in Georgia. There is a British connection here not only because Sturua has often worked in London, but because he is one of the featured directors in the Ken Reynolds exhibit. The Russian connection is that Sturua has worked even more in Moscow than in London. Since being fired from the Rustaveli in August 2011 following a flap with president Mikheil Saakashvili's administration, Sturua has been the chief director at Moscow's Et Cetera Theater.

According to a [report](#) on Lenta.ru, Sturua was also named the head of his own small theater, which he will open in January with a production of Terrence McNally's "Maria Callas."

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