

In Memory of Alexandra Chichkanova

By [John Freedman](#)

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Alexandra Chichkanova in 2010.

What I wouldn't give not to write what follows.

News came Thursday that Alexandra Chichkanova died. She hanged herself in her apartment in Yekaterinburg.

Alexandra Chichkanova is known to lovers of Russian theater all over the world. She was the executive director of Nikolai Kolyada's mighty little Kolyada Theater. She was Kolyada's right-hand woman, his protégé, his former student, his friend.

Most reports say she was 29. One said she was 28. According to her Facebook page, her next birthday was coming up December 17. She had just attended Kolyada's birthday celebration on Tuesday. There were so many reasons to rejoice. Or so we say in moments like this.

I first met Alexandra in 2005. I was in Yekaterinburg with a group of Americans looking

to learn the theatrical lay of that land. Alexandra was all over the place — putting out chairs, opening doors, handing out tickets, answering phones.

One day she was a featured speaker. Kolyada arranged for several graduates of his playwriting class at the Yekaterinburg Theater Institute to talk to us about their work. Alexandra graduated from the course in 1999. She was the author of numerous plays. I own copies of seven, published in the anthologies that Kolyada regularly puts out. One play, "The Book of Fates," was chosen as the title piece of a collection Kolyada published in 2004. It was that very year when Alexandra officially became Kolyada's executive director, a post she held until her death.

I was intrigued by Alexandra's soft-spoken, reserved, but also self-confident manner. She had a clear point of view and a tangible sense of self that made me want to know more about her work.

I myself was at a crossroads. Throughout the '90s and early part of the new decade I translated many Russian plays into English. By 2005 that work had run dry. I wasn't finding plays that fired my interest. I came home to Moscow with a suitcase full of Kolyada's anthologies and a vow to myself to find something that would get me back into translating.

After looking those books over forward and backward I settled on a short piece by Chichkanova. It is called "I Am Me." It's a monologue, the scattered thoughts of a young woman walking through a nondescript provincial town or city. It is filled with the mundane — Hungarian-made accordion buses, the nature of the myth of the Soviet soldier, favorite library books, familiar stone walls — but explores the unique spirit of a single human being existing amid all that is tedious and commonplace.

The writer's voice was genuine and compelling. She did not tell a story, there is no story in this play. It exists expressly to reveal character, an inimitable point of view, an unrepeatable life experience. The young female narrator of the play is hyper-sensitive and highly attuned to what distinguishes her from everything and everyone around her. It is a quiet declaration of independence, a hushed affirmation of individuality. Its power comes precisely from its understated nature.

Alexandra's plays were not snapped up by theaters. There was no great success story here. Yet, although she did not know it, her play put me back on my own personal track. Thanks to Alexandra and "I Am Me," I once again began translating. I never told her that. It wouldn't have occurred to me. Thoughts like that surface only when they are too late.

I saw Alexandra often after that first encounter in 2005. She was always with Kolyada when his theater travelled the world, Moscow included. She always greeted me with a big smile. She did numerous favors for me. She was always there when I needed someone to pass something to someone or when I needed to get a ticket for one of Kolyada's shows.

In the hours following Alexandra's suicide, a distraught Kolyada gave an ill-advised interview to Moskovsky Komsomolets, blaming her death on a young man, with whom Alexandra had been involved. Far more important and reliable than the accusations Kolyada made is the pain which can be heard in every word he uttered.

In fact, Kolyada's first response to the news of the tragedy, written as "Letter to Mama" on his LiveJournal [blog](#) at 3:19 a.m. on Thursday, was heart wrenching and beautiful:

"Mama! Welcome to the heavens my beloved child, my beautiful little girl Sashenka.

Mama! She was a daughter to me, I loved her so much, Mama!"

In order to translate and type that in here I had to read it a third time. And for a third time I have had to struggle to regain my composure.

In my case, I wish to leave the final words to Alexandra herself. The following is a bit of that play, "I Am Me," which helped get me working again seven years ago. Thank you, Alexandra. Here you are in English:

"Then one day you have to get off the bus, almost right there next to that wall, not on purpose, no, it just happened that way. And you're walking along there, going along and up ahead you see that wall, your wall, that one you've been looking at for 10 years from the window of the bus, through the glass there, and you come up to it and you realize that you're not going to walk past this thing so easily, no way. And you walk up and down the wall in an area where there aren't many people around and you find a box or something or a rock and you push it up against the wall and you get up on it and you think — okay, here it is, here's the moment of truth, 10 years have gone by in a flash, like a single day, and your heart's beating faster and faster and you peek over the top and look and ... there's nothing there, nothing but emptiness, just some bare asphalt and junk, asphalt and junk and you realize that maybe a year ago or half a year ago even, there used to be something here. There was, but you didn't get here in time to see it, you didn't get out of the bus here before, you didn't get up on a box or a rock and take a look. And, man, that really starts to hurt; there was a riddle here but there isn't any more, and so you're going along, just heading straight on ahead and you're not thinking about anything anymore, you don't want to get up the next morning, go to work, wait at the bus stop, ride that dirty bus — you don't want to do any of that. ..."

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