

Gennady Abramov, Dance Master, at 75

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Gennady Abramov celebrated his 75th birthday on Saturday. For me that was akin to a national — at least a national theatrical — holiday.

Gennady Abramov got Russian theater moving. And whether anybody wants to admit it or not, it is still shaking and jiving to the rhythms he set down.

Several of the country's busiest and most interesting choreographers were students of Abramov's at the School of Dramatic Art, where in the 1990s he conducted experimental and exploratory classes in dance and movement. His graduates include Vladimir Belyaikin, Vasily Yushchenko, Konstantin Mishin, and the husband-and-wife team of Albert Albert and Alexandra Konnikova. The latter's popular Po.v.s.tanze contemporary dance company grew out of their work with Abramov. Mishin continues to lead a dance laboratory at his alma mater, the School of Dramatic Art.

All these dancers and choreographers were members of Abramov's legendary Class of Plastic Expressive Movement at one time or another during its approximately 10 years of existence

in the 1990s and early 2000s. It began, indeed, as a class, a school, but it quickly developed into one of Moscow's most interesting theatrical companies. By 1993 it had garnered international attention and by 1994 that success was beginning to lay the groundwork for the group's eventual demise.

The culprit for that was a spate of creative and personal conflicts that arose between Abramov and Anatoly Vasilyev, the founder of the School of Dramatic Art. The two had been a powerful creative team for years, Abramov invariably choreographing the distinctive movement of Vasilyev's productions, beginning with an early work, "Hello, Dolly!" in Rostov-on-Don in 1976 and including Vasilyev's masterworks of A Young Man's Grown-Up Daughter, "Cerseau" and "Six Characters in Search of an Author" through the 1980s.

But as Vasilyev's impact waned in the 1990s and Abramov's work continually attracted attention, friction grew. Vasilyev ultimately pulled the plug on the Class of Expressive Plastic Movement, as the group was increasingly being invited to perform at European festivals. Without a home and without financial backing it struggled to remain alive until Abramov himself essentially declared the game over when he mounted a dance festival called Movement Ahead around what I believe was the group's last production, "Further Was Earlier," in 2001.

A major stress fracture had occurred in 1998 when the famous German choreographer Sasha Waltz recruited six of Abramov's highly-accomplished actors to perform in her production known alternately as "Na Zemlje" or "On Earth." Rehearsals and tours of this [show](#) kept the performers busy until 2001, by which time the Class of Expressive Plastic Movement was a thing of the past.

The Class of Expressive Plastic Movement was founded more or less contemporaneously to other important major Russian dance companies, including Tatyana Baganova's Provincial Dances in Yekaterinburg in 1990 and Olga Pona's Theater of Contemporary Dance in Chelyabinsk in 1992. The official founding date for Abramov's company is either 1990 or 1991, depending upon your source. In any case, this is the period and these are the places where any history of contemporary dance in Russia must begin.

But Abramov, who began his career as a classical ballet dancer in the 1960s and 1970s, was always up to much more than just dance. His productions better fitted what is called physical theater in the West, a term that never quite achieved maturity in Russia. Under his tutelage his actors time and again challenged the laws of physics. Some literally walked on walls and ceilings. They could climb over objects and one another in ways that were so unexpected and so gravity-defying that it was breathtaking. Their movements were filled with humor. Audiences spent a great deal of time laughing as they watched Abramov's deadpan performers create visual puns, do the seeming impossible and take slapstick to new levels.

You removed your shoes when you attended an Abramov production. Sixty, 70, 80 people shed their footwear and left it in a heap by the door to the small basement hall at 20 Povarskaya Ulitsa, where the actors trained and performed. This was, in part, to keep the hardwood floors clean, of course. But it was also a ritual. You felt on entering the space that you were crossing into another, a parallel, universe. This was a place that was not to be contaminated

by the outside world, and should not be treated as any other.

I recently was in the space for the first time in approximately 15 years. I was there to see a dramatic production touring from a far-flung Russian city. Now known as one of the stages in the Open Stage Project, its past glories nearly killed the show. Abramov's ghost, if you will, the specters of his actors performing miracles to the laughter and enthralled hush of audiences crammed into every nook and corner, overwhelmed everything. I looked upon earnest actors trying to connect with a small crowd in real time but could only see the faded, but undying, beauty that once was created routinely in this room.

Following the demise of the Class of Expressive Plastic Movement Abramov in 2002 was appointed the artistic director of the Contemporary Dance department at the Yekaterinburg State Humanitarian University, a position he held for most of the rest of the decade. He is currently in semi-retirement, working on two books. One is a glossary of dance terminology in Russian.

"How can we talk about dance and movement in Russian when we don't even agree on the words we use to describe it?" Abramov has said to me countless times.

If Gennady Abramov doesn't know how to talk about dance, nobody does. In which case we will patiently wait for him to speak the first word on the topic, again.

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