

# "Moscow Trials" Puts Art on Trial, Trials in Art

By [John Freedman](#)

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Journalist and theater director Mikhail Kaluzhsky called it a "theatrical slam." Olga Shakina, a journalist from the Dozhd television channel, said it was a moment when "one theatrical event replaced another."

What they were discussing on Saturday on Echo Moskvy radio was a now-notorious performance of "Moscow Trials," a documentary theater project at the Sakharov Center on March 3. It was interrupted at first by individuals at least claiming to be representatives of the Federal Migration Service, and then later by a group of Cossacks accompanied by a film crew.

"Moscow Trials" was a three-day event organized by Kaluzhsky to reconsider three notorious trials involving the arts in recent years. Directed by Swiss director Milo Rau, it involved journalists, actors and activists, such as Pussy Riot member Yekaterina Samutsevich, reenacting the roles of defendants, witnesses, jury members and judges in actual historical

court cases. On trial, so to speak, were the "Careful, Religion!" and "Banned Art" art exhibits in 2003 and 2007, respectively, and the 2012 case against the Pussy Riot activist group.

It was the latter performance on an otherwise calm Sunday that stirred the most controversy.

Shortly before 1 p.m. on March 3 Kaluzhsky sent out the first of numerous brief reports on his Facebook page, informing whoever was online that the performance had been stopped. Migration service officials arrived to check Milo Rau's visa, and while they were at it, began checking anyone in the hall suspected of being a non-national. From that first salvo through the final post shortly after 9 p.m., rumors, conjecture, heated opinion and heartfelt advice flew fast and heavy across Kaluzhsky's page.

Judging by the peak number of "likes" and comments — that occurred at around 2 p.m. when Kaluzhsky posted information that the performance had been resumed — a minimum of 100 people followed events on their computers and telephones. They included some of the most influential individuals in contemporary Russian culture — playwright Yelena Gremina, documentary filmmaker Maria Razbezhkina, theater director Oleg Rybkin, critic Pavel Rudnev and many more.

I followed events the entire day and found things only grew more confusing as time went on. As Saturday's discussion of the event on radio indicated, there are still plenty of questions about what really happened.

Kaluzhsky, speaking on a panel with Shakina and director Georg Genoux on Ksenia Larina's Culture Shock program, admitted he still doesn't know who exactly came to run checks on Rau's visa. He said he "cannot be sure" the officials were actually there on official orders. "Only one of the officers showed documents," he stated, and added that the Sakharov Center has submitted a series of protests and inquiries to the Federal Migration Service.

As for the Cossacks, there remain questions about their authenticity and purpose as well.

Shakina, who performed the part of a judge in the reenacted trial of Pussy Riot, told how one project participant showed some Cossacks what was transpiring on stage so that they could see for themselves that "no one was insulting anyone." But, the journalist said, it was comical to see how the Cossacks only pretended to listen with deep interest. In fact, she concluded, "there was no passion" in their behavior.

According to Kaluzhsky's real-time Facebook reports, the Cossacks, who mostly had been milling around outside the building, began to disperse when the police arrived around 4 p.m. But the police, too, found themselves in an awkward situation.

"I tried to explain to one policeman what documentary theater is," Kaluzhsky declared with a laugh. "Our discussion lasted 15 minutes and he sincerely tried to understand what was going on."

Larina, the popular radio host, sought to put the event in perspective by referring to an incident in Minsk, Belarus, in 2007 when the police arrived at a performance of the Free Theater and arrested everyone in attendance. "Everybody was let go," she said, "but a precedent was set."

The Free Theater of Minsk continues to exist, although its founders Nikolai Khalezin and Natalya Kalyada now live in exile in England.

The panelists also discussed the current state of Russian documentary theater, sometimes known as the theater of witnesses or political theater.

Teatr.doc's production of "One Hour Eighteen," based on the death of muck-raking attorney Sergei Magnitsky in prison, is an example of theater doing "what should have been done by journalists," said Shakina. "People can come to that show and in 90 minutes receive a mass of information."

Other shows cited as making significant contributions to the genre were "Uzbek," a production of Genoux's Joseph Beuys Theater, and Teatr.doc's "Light My Fire," a piece based loosely on the lives of American rock stars Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix.

Admitting that documentary theater makers still have much to achieve, Kaluzhsky suggested that one of its successes is that it provides an opportunity for "outcasts, those who can't speak for themselves," to be heard.

For those who are interested, a public discussion of what transpired March 3 will be held Tuesday at 7 p.m. at the Sakharov Center prior to an 8 p.m. performance of the documentary project "Act Two. Grandchildren." If you plan to attend you must [register](#) in advance.

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