

English-Language Theater to Start in Moscow

By [Lena Smirnova](#)

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The working class girl from Liverpool reading to an English literature professor in a rehearsal of "Educating Rita." **Simone Peek**

When Royal Shakespeare Company alum Jonathan Bex realized he was spending a lot of time in Moscow but had little hope of acting in any of the city's many theaters, he came up with a creative solution. He decided to start a theater company that would offer exclusively English-language productions to local audiences.

Moscow English Theater will bring professional actors from Britain to stage contemporary British and American drama in Moscow. All the plays will be performed in English, with the first production set to premiere this weekend.

For this premiere, Bex chose Willy Russell's two-person comedy "Educating Rita," in which he also plays the leading role along with Emma Dallow.

"I realized that I wouldn't be able to get any work in Russian theater unless I could stand in the background and hold drink trays and occasionally say 'do svidaniya,'" Bex said.

Thanks to Moscow English Theater, Bex does not have to hold drink trays, but instead consumes liqueur while teaching English literature, and at a university level, no less.

The popular play "Educating Rita," which is even included in some school curriculums in Britain, looks at a 26-year-old hairdresser who enrolls in an English literature college course to escape her daily routine and improve her prospects. Her tutor is a 50-year-old disillusioned academic who stashes whiskey in his office and prefers to teach classes from a pub.

Rita becomes a breath of fresh air to his life, and their year-long relationship sees many touching and educational moments.

"It's such a massive honor for me to perform here because in the West, in England, Russian theater is the vanguard of everything perceived as being the best," Dallow said of the high expectations set for actors in Russia. "It's so exciting for me but also a massive pressure on my shoulders. I have to be the best I've ever been in this show."

The company's first project is meant to test how much demand there is in Moscow for English-language theater, so they've purposefully taken a small-scale venue to limit the risk. The play will be performed at the 90-seat small stage of the Mayakovsky Theater, with just enough set furniture to make it look like an academic environment.

An unexpected obstacle arose when the actors realized that the bookcases on the Mayakovsky set were stacked with Russian books, but here they are also managed to find a low-budget solution. Bex and Dallow carted some English books over on their flights to Moscow, and Dallow's boyfriend will help out with another batch when he arrives ahead of the weekend's performances.

"I didn't know how it would sell," Bex said. "I worried, 'Will we lose loads of money, or will there be an audience out there?' Our hope is that the audience will come along to see a professional show."

The response, so far, has been positive. Most shows have almost sold out, with native Russians buying many of the tickets. According to Bex, this shows that English-language theater can find a good audience among the younger generations of Russians who are fluent in English and have been raised in a country with an extensive theater history.

In the future, Moscow English Theater hopes to rent out larger venues and expand its budget. There will be about three to four shows produced per year, with the next play most likely seeing its debut in the fall. Bex is also looking into ways to bring existing English-language shows to Russia.

Future productions could include "Bouncers," "Woman in Black" and "Incident at the Border," depending on how successful Bex is at getting the rights. The focus, as with all Moscow English Theater productions, will be on contemporary drama.

Classical drama is already well covered in Moscow, so the company wants to stage plays that

resonate with contemporary themes, Bex explained.

"There's a lot of change in Russia at the moment, with the younger generation and the street marches back in 2012," Dallow said. "Theater and art, they're a forum where we try to move with that. So, simply doing classics all the time is a bit of a regurgitation."

Bex did not rule out that Russian actors with fluent English may eventually be invited to take part in the productions, but he added that the main actors would still be British. The theater company could then keep its unique selling point, which is particularly enticing to audience members who want to listen to native speakers and get a taste of British theater.

"I hope that people will go, 'Hey, British theater is engaging. It's thought-provoking and entertaining all in the same breath,'" Bex said. "If we can achieve that, we'd be ambassadors for Britain."

"Educating Rita" plays on March 16 and 17 at 2 p.m. and 6 p.m. at the Mayakovsky Theater, located at 19/13 Bolshaya Nikitskaya Ulitsa. Metro Tverskaya, Pushkinskaya, Chekhovskaya. Phone: +7 495-690-4658. www.mayakovsky.ru.

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