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Italian Gestures Cut Through the Russian Language Barrier

By Lena Smirnova

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Stefano de Luca guiding an all-Russian cast in a rehearsal with the help of a translator and some lively gestures. **Yelena Saltevskaya**

What does it take to direct a play full of actors whose language you do not speak and who seem miles away from you in their theatrical traditions? Italian director Stefano de Luca has come up with a mix of simple ingredients — a translator and a slew of lively gestures — so effective that now the Russian actors not only understand him, but are also learning to be Italian.

De Luca is in Moscow to stage Eduardo De Filippo's play "Filumena Marturano" at Maly Theater. The postwar play focuses on the wealthy shop-keeper Domenico Soriano, who has led a selfish life filled with female affections, horses and traveling. It is with the help of his constant companion Filumena, a former prostitute, that Soriano starts to understand what he is missing.

Maly Theater has recruited a stellar cast for this production, comprised of stage and film

veterans Yury Solomin, who is also the theater's artistic director, and Irina Muravyova. Although neither of them speaks Italian, the director is able to guide the actors during rehearsals through a translator and some energetic gestures.

De Luca is not new to working with actors who speak a foreign language. Before coming to Russia, he had staged performances in Hungary, Romania and Germany. He also staged another Italian play at Maly Theater in 2010, Carlo Goldoni's "Innamorati," which follows the humorous quarrels between two young lovers.

This time around it is easier to direct the play because he understands more Russian, De Luca said. His translator quipped that he is "fluent" in the language, though De Luca modestly limited himself to reciting a couple of Alexander Pushkin poems.

However, even with these improved language skills, the director's task is not a simple one.

"It's always a huge challenge to direct actors in this kind of situation. You have a big handicap," he said. "On the other side, it's interesting because you get more and more sensitive to the relations on stage, so you feel if [the actors] are saying the words in the right way."

During rehearsals, De Luca pays close attention to intonations and body language to grasp whether the actors have understood the scene. At some moments he even steps in to instruct them in the art of the legendary Italian gesticulation.

"Sometimes I show them how an Italian could behave and what gesture he would make in that moment," De Luca said. "They laugh, but they adopt from me these gestures and attitudes."

It can be tricky to get the stereotypically gloomy Russians to imitate wild Italian gestures and capture the spirit of the Italian plays, which De Luca described as more light and ironic. Russian actors come from different, more classical theater traditions, De Luca explained, but added that the actors he was working with were already not only learning gestures, but trying to say the words as well.

Irina Muravyova, in particular, likes to "play Italian," De Luca said.

"She'll start to say ta-da-da-da-da, without any meaning. She likes it a lot," he said, imitating the actress's comically exaggerated gestures.

To make the production more authentic, Maly Theater has also taken on an Italian set designer, the same designer who decorated the stage for "Innamorati."

The set will look simple. All the action will take place in a room with only the necessary furniture, a table and two chairs. This simple set reflects the symbolism of a table in an Italian room as an object around which people gather, meet and dine.

This symbolism and the authentic Italian atmosphere are some of the things that Stefano De Luca is most keen to convey in his production. Meanwhile, the collaboration with the Russian theater is a chance for him to knock down some stereotypes about his native country.

"I feel responsible because I'm bringing not just the playwrights, but I'm bringing a way

of making theater," De Luca said. "I'm glad that Italy is not just a country where you can love or where the pope lives, but it's also the country that has such great theater people, like Goldoni and De Filippo that were great geniuses and can give a lot to humankind."

The Italian director has no long-term projects lined up in Russia after "Filumena Marturano" premiers, but did say "it would be interesting" for him to stage Russian plays in the country.

"Filumena Marturano" will premiere at Maly Theater on April 7. As an added bonus, theatergoers who stop by the Maly Theater until the beginning of next month will also be able to catch a glimpse of the theater's costume exhibition. The exhibit, which opens on Wednesday, displays 20 male and female costumes that were used in the plays staged over the 19th and 20th centuries.

"Filumena Marturano" plays on April 7 at the main stage of Maly Theater, located at 1/6 Teatralnaya Ploshchad. Phone: +7 495-624-4046. In May it will be shown at the Maly Theater Affiliate, located at 69 Ulitsa Bolshaya Ordynka, though the dates are not yet set. www.maly.ru.

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