

Russian Theater in English, French and Maybe Uzbek

By [John Freedman](#)

April 14, 2013

The  Moscow Times

Over the decades I have had countless conversations with foreigners in Moscow who claim to love theater but who do not attend shows because they don't understand Russian.

My standard response is always the same: You don't need to understand Russian to understand Russian theater. It is an extremely expressive art form — the acting, the lighting, the design, and the innovative work of directors all form a rich, parallel language through which the basic story of any performance is told, whether or not you understand the words being spoken.

Now, this doesn't mean anyone agrees with me, especially directors.

Having heard my spiel, Kama Ginkas once gave me a withering stare and said, "I'll bet that doesn't work."

I never spoke with Pyotr Fomenko on the topic, but the director and founder of the Fomenko Studio who died last August, is the source of a particularly pithy quote that makes it clear what he would have thought of my optimism. "Theater in a foreign language," he said, "is like a kiss through a pane of glass."

Funny, yes. Convincing even. But it may no longer be true if, of all theaters, the Fomenko Studio has its way.

A new system of subtitles and oral translation of performances aimed at making Russian theater accessible to speakers of other languages was unveiled by a team headed by managing director Andrei Vorobyov at the Fomenko Studio on Friday.

(In the spirit of full disclosure, allow me to say that I recently joined the project to work on the creation of English-language texts.)

When the system is fully functional, which Vorobyov expects to happen within two years, the subtitles and translations will be delivered directly to spectators via an electronic tablet. A simple program will allow users to select the language of their choice — Russian, English, French or German. Translations of the show's spoken dialogue will appear on the tablet in real time in discrete white lettering on a black background.

For those who prefer to hear the text spoken in their chosen language, headphones attached to the electronic tablet will make that possible.

Subtitles for a handful of Fomenko's most popular productions are already available in French and English, including "Family Happiness," "Three Sisters" and "War and Peace." "Wolves and Sheep" is available in French, "Three Sisters" in German. The goal at present is to make all of Fomenko's productions available, after which the remainder of the theater's offerings will be fitted with translated subtitles, both printed and spoken.

Vorobyov explained that the project's target audience is non-Russian speakers whose "cultural program is limited to the Bolshoi and the Tretyakov Gallery," but he added that there are other beneficiaries as well. For example, hearing-impaired spectators already are using the tablets in order to see the Russian-language text as it is performed.

The idea for an innovative system of subtitles originally arose in connection with the Fomenko Studio's frequent tours abroad. "We wondered how you avoid hanging a screen on stage that will hinder an audience's perception of the show," Vorobyov stated.

The result was FOMA, a complex combination of hardware and software named in honor of Fomenko that was developed by the theater in conjunction with a company called Compile Group. However, when it became evident that, in modified form, the system could be used in Moscow, the city's Culture Committee provided a 3 million ruble grant to purchase and modify equipment.

Moreover, it is equipment and knowledge that can be used at any theater.

"We are not greedy," Vorobyov stated, "we have lent this system to several theaters and festivals and we will be happy to do more of that in the future."

Speaking on behalf of the Culture Committee, Yevgenia Shermeniyova declared that city authorities value the social implications of the FOMA project. Affirming that the city is committed to making culture accessible to all in the city, and with a nod to Moscow's large numbers of migrant workers, Shermeniyova declared that "in the future we may also translate subtitles into Uzbek and Moldovan."

Vorobyov announced that numerous improvements to the system are in the works. Plans exist to include Spanish and Italian to the list of available languages, and spectators with iPhones and androids eventually will be able to download an app that will allow them to receive subtitles on their personal devices. As for those who are presently using electronic tablets provided by the theater, it soon will not be necessary to hold the device in hand throughout the performance. Small tablet holders affixed to the back of the seat in front of you will soon be introduced.

Beyond all of this is the potential for webcasting subtitled performances. The Fomenko Studio already webcasts occasional performances in Russian. But once the system of subtitles is fully in place, it may well be possible to spend your day exploring Milan, Taipei or Los Angeles on foot, then sit down at your computer and spend the evening in Moscow at the Fomenko Studio.

Pyotr Fomenko himself might call that nothing more than another kiss through glass, but you have to admit, it has a seductive ring to it.

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