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Alan Bennett's 'People' on Moscow's Screens

By Aliide Naylor

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British actress Selina Cadell's sudden arrival in Moscow to discuss National Theater Live's new projection of Alan Bennett's "People" in the city's Horizon Cinema, brought with it some interesting insights into how the city has changed.

"I was last here in 1974," she said, gazing around the hotel's luxurious interior in amazement. "I was a student. I found it really alarming. Alarming and quite unpleasant."

Among the numerous travel restrictions imposed on her movements as an adventurous student included not being allowed to "bring slogans into the country."

"I have no idea what they meant by that," she laughed. "There were many things we did wrong and got into trouble."

"People" itself has been on British stage since 2012, but its first projections in Moscow only

began this April.

"The synopsis of the play is a very complicated one," she said, not wanting to give too much away. "I will say that it is set in an English stately home." The home itself is occupied by two very different sisters, one played by Selina, and the other played by Frances de la Tour.

Selina's character "broke out" and became part of the church, while Frances' character stayed "and dilapidated with he house."

The play raises a number of questions in regards to old age and decay, both with people and the buildings they reside in.

"The question in the play is what are we going to do with the house: Are we just going to let it rot?" The other option is giving it to the National Trust, which means a slight commercialization of it," Selina said, referring to the process as "Disney-fying."

She does however have some reservations about the play's relevance in Russia, and whether the audience will have an understanding of the processes involved in the preservation of English stately homes.

"When I was first asked to do it, I thought there would have been many other plays that would have been more suitable," she admits. "I guess there are lots of doddering old buildings in Russia, but I don't know if there's anything quite like the National Trust".

She appeared relieved to find out that "Calendar Girls" and its representation of an English Women's' Institute was enjoying a Russian staging with relative success. However, she also recognized that there are some themes that are applicable worldwide.

"I guess the themes of age, decay unfolding ... what we're forced to do, and what the world of commerce makes us do." Russia's "Westernization" since her last visit makes her observation seem all the more relevant, as she inadvertently creates a parallel between the subject matter of the play — the commercialization of the stately home — and the provision of information for tourists.

"People don't always want to be told everything. It used to be that people wandered around things and worked things out for themselves, and now everything's so ticked and labeled," she says.

Selina also believes that Alan Bennett's witty critical eye on the National Trust will work well in Russia. She describes him as "a provocative playwright."

"I think Moscow will like that," she adds.

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