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'Interesting, Intense' Moscow Theater a 'Real Treat'

By John Freedman

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Marc Robinson has the distinction of being the most popular guest I have ever hosted on this page with a video. (I post the videos on YouTube and link to them here in my blogs.)

I have recorded the thoughts and experiences of some impressive people over the years, including the great American director Lee Breuer; artistic director of the influential New York Theater Workshop Jim Nicola; New York actress Heidi Schreck; Russian playwright Olga Mukhina; and many more. (I had a great chat with American playwright Annie Baker but the media-shy author asked me to take it down when some of her comments were quoted back to her by a New York Times interviewer.)

Only Breuer, whose video had been viewed by 2,658 people at the time of this writing, comes close to Robinson, whom I recorded talking about Russian culture on a wintry evening across from the Moscow Circus on Tsvetnoi Bulvar in 2010. Marc has been seen by 2,947 people.

Well, as they say, here is Marc Robinson back by popular demand.

Marc has been in town for two months on a sabbatical leave from his teaching duties at St. Olaf. This professor, translator and playwright keeps close tabs on what is happening in Moscow theater, seeing shows three to five times a week. Intriguingly, he points out that it took nothing less than celebrated playwright Ivan Vyrypayev to open up his eyes a bit early on in his trip.

"I took the position that [theater] was a little less interesting than in previous years, and [Vyrypayev] thought it was growing and changing in interesting ways," Marc told me, and then added, "Over my two months here so far I think I have to reevaluate my position."

Marc spoke specifically about four shows that stand out in his mind. Here are a few excerpts from his comments, which can be watched in full in the video I made of our chat.

1) Yury Klavdiyev's "I Am the Machine Gunner," directed by Vladimir Pankov for SounDrama, now playing at the Gogol-Center, which Marc describes as "an incredible new arts space."

The play, Marc points out, is "written as a one-man show and so it is very exciting to go and see it performed by nine different people. Where else can you go and see a one-man show performed by nine people and see Hilary and Obama and Putin and Sarkoszy all playing balalaikas and singing 'Hotel California'?"

"It's a very interesting, intense piece, but seeing it performed in this way really broadened the message to include global violence on a governmental scale."

2) Dmitry Krymov's "Auction," an adaptation of various Anton Chekhov texts at the School of Dramatic Art.

Referring to the show by its Russian title of "Torgi," Marc admits that he just got around to seeing this production which premiered in 2006, but was nonetheless impressed by it.

"It's a mix-up of all of Chekhov's plays utilizing the set motifs throughout all of his plays, such as the mature actors, the young couple in love, the jokesters, the estate for sale, all the things that run through many of his plays."

Marc states that "Auction" is "performed with such a sense of 'play' and is also very unified."

3) Bertolt Brecht's "The Good Person of Setzuan," directed by Yury Butusov for the Pushkin Theater.

"I have an appreciation for Brecht," Marc points out right away with a bit of a wry smile, "but I don't truly love him. This production really brought home to me how exciting a good production of Brecht can be."

Referring to the Pushkin Theater's recent reputation as less than a front-line venue in Moscow, and to the death of the recent artistic director Roman Kozak, Marc notes that he sees a genuine revival taking place at the playhouse: "I see a movement to try to bring into the mix some edgier, more interesting works. Every show I have seen there has been really well done. It's very hard to lose a beloved artistic director and to maintain momentum. I

think they're doing an excellent job."

4) "Mother's Field," directed and choreographed by Sergei Zemlyansky on the basis of a story by Chinghiz Aitmatov for the Pushkin Theater.

"Incredibly moving" is the way Marc describes this piece that he occasionally refers to by the Russian title of "Materinskoye Pole." It is, he says, a "play without any words" that uses "mostly gesture and dance to tell a story by Chinghiz Aitmatov about a family going through the war."

Marc had especial words of praise for the company at the Pushkin Theater, declaring that the skill of the venue's young actors made a particular impression on him. He recalls seeing a performance of "The Good Person of Setzuan," which ended late at night, and then going to see a noon performance of "Treasure Island" the next day. Most of the two casts were made up of the same actors.

The "ability of these young actors to do both" serious and children's theater is "something that has constantly amazed me from the very beginning of my study of Russian theater," Marc declares.

In short, Ivan Vyrypayev seems to have succeeded in convincing Robinson to reevaluate his lukewarm early impressions on his current sojourn in Moscow.

"I highly recommend Russian theater right now," Marc concludes, "It's a real treat."

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