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If It's September It Must be Lyubimovka!

By John Freedman

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The first letters in the Moscow theater season for the last decade have been precisely these: L-y-u-b-i-m-o-v-k-a.

You can't imagine starting a theater season here anymore without first fighting your way through this wild, woolly, feisty, arrogant, irritating, exhausting, exhilarating and incredibly important festival. This is the place where Russia discovers the majority of the new plays that will grace stages all over the nation for the next few years.

If you read the mission statement on the festival's website you will see that Lyubimovka is geared toward the young and the unknown. "We want to present new authors to the theater world," it states clearly. That certainly is a major part of it and many an unknown has become a someone thanks to the exposure that Lyubimovka offers.

But it is also true that in recent years the festival has done a good job of giving continuing support to its stars. One of the real strengths of Lyubimovka is that it provides a balance of the brand new and the brand names of contemporary Russian drama.

That said, I think we may expect to encounter a new style this year. After having been run by Yelena Gremina and Mikhail Ugarov for several years, later by Yelena Kovalskaya, a new team is now in charge. Mikhail Durnenkov, one of the country's most prominent playwrights, has taken over aided by numerous young talents who have been contributing to the theater process for several years. They are playwright and screenwriter Yevgeny Kazachkov, critic Anna Banasyukevich, art manager Maria Krupnik, director Yury Muravitsky and projects coordinator Kristina Lobayeva.

We'll find out what this means in concrete terms over the eight days of the festival's running. But here are a few things I am sure will remain unchanged — there will be hundreds of people jockeying for seats to the prime events; the courtyard outside Teatr.doc, where all the events occur, will always be buzzing; there will be precious little useful oxygen inside the hall; and there will be a wide array of opinions stated bluntly and without ceremony at the discussions.

It all opens Sunday — that is, today — at 3 p.m. and concludes Sunday, September 8 with the last reading commencing at 9 p.m. There are usually four events each day, although on Saturday they've added a fifth, Rodion Beletsky's master-class in survival skills for playwrights, which begins at 1 p.m.

Expect the house to be crammed to the rafters for a few of the readings. These surely will include Yaroslava Pulinovich's "Sleepwalking" on Monday at 9 p.m., Pavel Pryazhko's "The Melancholy Hockey Player" on Wednesday at 7 p.m., Yury Klavdiyev's "Night and Fog" on Thursday at 9 p.m., and Maksym Kurochkin's "Dulcey and Roxy in the Office of the Mayor" Sept. 8 at 9 p.m.

Two other major writers will make appearances at Lyubimovka for the first time in many years.

Ivan Vyrypayev returns with "Summer Wasps Bite Us Even in November" on Tuesday at 9 p.m., while Olga Mukhina, whose plays "Tanya-Tanya" and "YoU" were instrumental in establishing the reputation of Lyubimovka in the mid-1990s, will present her new play "Olympia" on Wednesday at 3 p.m.

In all 32 new plays will be given staged readings by a democratic mix of well-known and unknown directors. Zhenya Berkovich, who debuted two years ago, oversees the reading of Maria Zelinskaya's "I'm Not Sonya" on Thurs. at 3 p.m. Talgat Batalov, who has made a name for himself as an actor and director in recent years, directs Alexander Arkhipov's "Headquarters," a documentary play about Alexei Navalny's mayoral campaign on Fri. at 9 p.m. The veteran Vladimir Mirzoyev will direct Alexei Balabanov's "My Brother Died" on Sept. 8 at 7 p.m.

The full festival listing is published on the Lyubimovka website.

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