The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

"New Russian Plays" in English

By John Freedman

September 22, 2013



Readers of this space know the name of Noah Birksted-Breen. He actually wrote a few guest blogs here a few years ago when I was on vacation — the only person I've ever entrusted my blog to. More importantly, however, I've written about Noah's important work in detail or in passing many times.

He founded the Sputnik Theatre in London in 2005 with the purpose of championing Russian drama and theater in the U.K. He's been doing that ever since. In the ensuing years he has presented four full-fledged productions of contemporary Russian plays — all directed and translated by him. He periodically presents staged readings of new and unusual works, such as the reading he'll present of jailed oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky's prison diaries October 23 this year.

In 2010 he mounted a festival of readings that introduced London audiences to plays by Yaroslava Pulinovich, Natalya Kolyada, Maksym Kurochkin and Vladimir Zuyev. In 2012 he translated and directed a production of Yelena Gremina's "One Hour Eighteen Minutes," about the prelude and aftermath to the death in a prison cell of Russian muckraker Sergei

Magnitsky. Now, in 2013, he has published "New Russian Plays," a collection of five plays he has worked with in the first eight years of his theater's life.

The book contains the descriptive phrase "Five contemporary playwrights who have shaped playwriting in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus." Indeed, even in such a small number of plays, Birksted-Breen was able to provide a striking picture of the diversity that is Russian drama today.

Natalia Kolyada (often spelled Kaliada since she is from Belarus) is a founding member of the famous Belarus Free Theater which, due to the repressive politics of that small nation, is now in residence in England. Birksted-Breen presented her play "Dreams" at his festival in 2010. It is a piece for six females, aged 30 to 60, and it explores women who are pursuing or have pursued lives that exist on one side or the other from the norm.

"Techniques of Breathing in an Air-Locked Space" by Natalya Moshina, a writer from the city of Ufa, was one of Birksted-Breen's earliest projects. It was his second full production in 2006. By then it had achieved some renown in Russian theater circles by way of a production done by the Free Theater in Minsk. It is an episodic piece that observes various people whose lives are closing in on them, such as an actress fed up with her profession, or a young woman struggling with cancer.

Vladimir Zuyev is from Yekaterinburg, one of the mighty army of playwrights who have studied with Nikolai Kolyada (no relation to Natalia) at the Yekaterinburg State Theater Institute. His play "Mums," as translated by Birksted-Breen, was first published in 2006. It involves a group of people living "on the edge of despair," as one character puts it, in and around a dingy basement during a war.

Two writers in the collection — Yury Klavdiyev and Maksym Kurochkin — are arguably the two most powerful playwrights working in Russian theater today. The former is from the Southern Russian city of Tolyatti, and emerged as a force to be reckoned with in the mid-2000s. The latter is a native of Kiev, Ukraine, but has made Moscow and the Russian language his home for the last 15 years.

Kurochkin's "Tityus the Irreproachable" is a marvelous example of this writer's effervescent, exuberant, absolutely irrepressible imagination. It is a vividly-colored dramatic canvas that uses a sci-fi setting (a spaceship in the distant future) to grapple with contemporary problems that have existed for thousands of years. Characters with names like Administrator-Killer, Architecton, Pork, Blob and Suburbius are engaged in a "post-human era" battle to forestall the future. You can imagine how well that comes off.

Klavdiyev's "The Slow Sword," which opens the collection, is a quintessential work by this writer — violent, smart and unforgiving. It tells the story of a young professional dropping out of his successful life to see how and why people live. He encounters drug addicts, thieves, rapists and victims. It is a harsh, nasty, powerful play that walks all over attempts to understand the world of these characters through a liberal or conservative philosophy.

I first met Noah in Tolyatti about seven years ago. We were in the city to attend a play festival and it was there that we both encountered Klavdiyev's "The Slow Sword," done as a staged reading by Klavdiyev himself with the help of his friends and family.

Klavdiyev is a master reader of his own plays, as were his wife, mother and his friend, the playwright Mikhail Durnenkov. That day had a lasting impression on me and, as it turns out, on Noah. He told me many years later, after he staged the play in London in 2007, that he would never have known what approach to take had he not seen that raw reading.

Now the play leads off Birksted-Breen's "New Russian Plays" anthology, the first such collection in the English language.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/09/22/new-russian-plays-in-english-a34443