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Russian History Through Russian Drama

By John Freedman

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You want new plays? Russia's got 'em.

There is Moscow's Lyubimovka festival, the granddaddy of them all. There is the D.NK festival in Krasnoyarsk. The Eurasia in Yekaterinburg. The newly-founded New Plays for Old Theater festival in Kaluga. The Omsk contemporary play laboratory. St. Petersburg's Alexander Volodin festival. The Character List festival at the Contemporary Play School in Moscow. The Contest of Contests run by the New Play organization at the Golden Mask... And I'm only getting started.

Also just getting started is, you guessed it, another new play reading series in Moscow.

This one has its own twist — it will present not only new plays, but old plays by contemporary authors that have fallen between the cracks of time. The unifying principle is history — all plays will be historical dramas.

Next up on Oct. 14 will be readings of numerous short dramatic texts by a host

of contemporary writers — Maksym Kurochkin, Andrei Vishnevsky, Yevgeny Kazachkov and Ksenia Dragunskaya among them. The series, which has the descriptive title of Reading Cycle of Historical Plays by Contemporary Authors, took its first step Tuesday evening with a staged reading of selected scenes from "Treason, Sire!" by Yury Shpitalny. It was attended by a standing-room-only crowd of about 80.

Shpitalny's play has been around since at least 1985, judging by complimentary comments by the famous Russian critic Natalya Krymova that are reprinted in the program. And judging by the comments made by spectators following the reading, it still has a strong, if small, following these many years later.

"Treason, Sire!" tells the story of Prince Andrei Kurbsky's last days in Russia in the 16th century. Kurbsky is a prominent figure not only in Russian history, but in Russian literature, thanks to the correspondence he conducted with Tsar Ivan IV, commonly known to us as Ivan the Terrible. His differences of opinion with, and fear of reprisals from, the Russian ruler caused him to abandon a position of power and defect to Russia's enemy Lithuania in 1564.

Speaking during the post-reading discussions, playwright Alexander Zheleztsov noted that Shpitalny's play, which is nearly 30 years old, has retained the fresh feel of a new play. Children's writer Fyodor Gavrin noted that "Treason, Sire!" is a good example of why a work is "always timely if it is written well."

Disagreement arose as to why, exactly, the play remains timely for a contemporary audience. Some spoke about its treatment of tyranny and the intrigues of power. Others, however, suggested that the topic of emigration was more to the point.

"If I don't find myself in a play, there is no reason for me to read it," said Marina Pereleshina, a speech pedagogue at one of Moscow's theater institutes. Referring to the increasingly large Russian diaspora in England, she added, "I want to say that all the people who have escaped to London are people who have run from the next regime, not the current one."

Moderator Yelena Isayeva, a playwright and poet, declared that she particularly admired Shpitalny's language. "Yury's language is fabulous," she said, "Without using archaisms he was able to make us believe that these people actually talked like this."

Shpitalny himself insisted that he had no intentions of "flipping the bird in his pocket" when writing "Treason, Sire!" This pithy Russian phrase refers to a practice, common especially in the 1960s and 1970s, whereby a writer told a story set in other times or cultures in order to make semi-hidden criticisms of contemporary themes.

"I have a strange fate as a playwright," Shpitalny said. "I have another unstaged play, about which people always tell me, 'Oh, that's about Gorbachev!' But I had no such idea in my head when I wrote it."

The readings of historical plays will continue in October in one of Moscow's newest venues, the Boyarskiye Palaty, or Chambers of the Nobility, located at the back of the Russian Theater Union, 10 Strastnoi Bulvar. (Walk all the way around the right side of the building to find the entrance.) Readings begin at 7 p.m. and are open to the public, free of charge.

Yelena Isayeva informs me that a website is still in the making, but some information may be had by going to the event's page on Facebook.

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