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What Ruth Maleczech Taught Me About Theater

By John Freedman

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Long ago in Boston I got a one-two shot of Ruth Maleczech that I never forgot.

In early March 1988 I saw her perform in Peter Sellars' production of Velemir Khlebnikov's avant-garde poem "Zangezi." Two months later I saw her do a one-woman performance of a single chapter from Vasily Grossman's epic novel "Life and Fate."

I realize now what an impact those performances had on me. They were nothing like anything I had grown up to expect from American theater. They were gripping. They were challenging. They were intent to leave bruises of some kind, whether of an emotional or intellectual sort.

Maleczech came to me — and not only me — with fire in her eyes and love in her heart. And she laid that on me in productions that had me guessing from beginning to end.

These were neither the happy-go-lucky musicals I got dragged to from time to time in my

childhood. Nor were they of the earnest, well-meaning family saga-type play that was pretty hard to avoid on the American stage when I was growing up.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, both of the texts I saw Maleczech perform were by Russian authors. I had long come to expect to be provoked and confronted by Russian writers. What I was not prepared for when I first saw Maleczech perform was that an American actor would be so willing and able to take her audience to such deep, defiant, and often uncomfortable places with her.

So strong was the impression she made on me that I have carried her image in my mind with me for all these years. I was thrilled to have the opportunity to renew my one-way acquaintance with her (I never met her or spoke to her) when she came to Moscow in 1998 to perform in Lee Breuer's production of "Hajj." It was for me a kind of homecoming — although in this case it was Maleczech coming to my adopted home to work. There she was, again, with the same intensity, the same detail, the same absolutely indescribable ability to slap my heart and open my mind.

Ruth Maleczech died last week at the age of 74.

She was a vital figure in American theater. She was a co-founder of the great Mabou Mines company. She collaborated with some of the finest directors American theater had — Sellars, Breuer, Joanne Akalatis, and Frederick Wiseman, who staged "Life and Fate," to name just a few. The information about her is freely available at the fingertips of anyone with access to a computer. But I'm compelled to add a few words drawn from the yellowing programs of "Zangezi" and "Life and Fate" that I still have in my archive.

"Ruth Maleczhech," one begins, "is a first generation American, born in Cleveland, Ohio, of Yugoslavian parents."

"She lived for five years in Europe, performing in numerous productions in Paris, London, and Edinburgh, and studying with Jerzy Grotowski and the Berliner Ensemble," says the other.

No wonder, then, that she speared me with a passion in her acting that seemed alien to my experience, but was precisely what my heart and soul were seeking.

There are a few hand-scribbled notes on the back of my "Life and Fate" program that bear vague witness to what I experienced during that performance about a doomed woman named Anna in a Jewish ghetto in Kiev in 1941 writing her last letter to her son.

"Use of diminishing light to focus more and more on Anna and create more intimacy."

"Black background, black dress, her face and arms, dark green socks and shoes."

"Ruth appears and disappears."

A short review that I co-wrote and published with my colleague Hallie Anne White contains this telling phrase: "[Maleczech] maintains almost constant eye contact with the audience, forcing them to respond to her on a direct and individual level, even though she addresses the entire monologue to her son."

In that phrase, as in my memory, I see Ruth Malezcech holding my gaze with hers.

I realize now that I still go to the theater looking for that gaze. And I know it when I see it, because I have already seen it in the past. Ruth Maleczech was not the only actor I ever encountered with that kind of power. But she was the first and she was the one who made me understand it in a way that went deeper than I knew myself at the time. She put a ticking time bomb in me that continues to go off whenever I see great theater. What a gift she gave!

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