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Turning Lives Around With Theater

By John Freedman

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"It turned my life around," Yevgeny Lyapin told a crowd of 700 people at the Pushkin Theater last Monday, "because now I want to work in theater. I had thought about singing or TV hosting and other possibilities, but theater has now entered my life. I never realized theater could be such an interesting thing."

Lyapin, who is 19, is one of dozens of physically challenged young people who have come through, and been changed by, the Theater Perspectives program organized by the Perspectives Regional Social Organization of Invalids (the acronym in Russian is ROOI). Theater Perspectives is just one of many programs run by ROOI. Others include film festivals, athletic competitions, educational programs and practical help for physically challenged youth entering adulthood in Russia.

Theater Perspectives is part of ROOI's project titled Leadership Development among Physically Challenged Youth. Debuting in June 2012, it brings together professional Russian theater artists with young people in order to create original works of theater art. A second evening of works that grew out of the latest project is planned for December this year.

The idea is relatively simple. A group of professional playwrights spends several days in workshops with young people who have an interest in writing a play. Once the plays are written, they are turned over to professional directors and actors who, with the authors' participation, bring them to life on stage. The October 14 showing presented five of 11 plays that were composed at the most recent workshop. All of the newly minted authors are between the ages of 11 and 16.

Lyuba Strizhak, who has had hit plays at Praktika Theater and the Gogol Center, was one of several writers sharing her expertise. Speaking at a press conference held prior to the performances she said, "Every child I worked with experienced a breakthrough in the sense that they all experienced powerlessness at some point, and they all broke through their 'I-don't-want-to' to achieve their goal. The point is not to help a child get an 'A' in playwriting, but to give them a sense of what it means to be a playwright."

It was this experience that had such an impact on Yevgeny Lyapin. He pointed out that he was one of the authors in the first workshop in 2012, and that this time he was to perform as an actor in another's play. He also emceed the evening, zipping deftly around the stage in his motorized wheel chair.

"It has given me a place to express myself," Lyapin said of Theater Perspectives. "A person who wants to be creative always runs up against the fear of 'how do I do it?' Perspective breaks down the fear that holds you back. They help you take your first step and your second step, then you're off and running and you can't be stopped."

The plays themselves, lasting from between 10 to 30 minutes each, were wildly imaginative. Some looked like they could become full professional productions with a little fleshing-out.

Andrei Klyuyev, 15, and Dzhennet Bazarova, 11, wrote a brisk and funny piece called "Thirst," that observed a girl entering a new school and overcoming the difficulties that any young person has breaking into new social circumstances. Her difficulties are all the more complex, and hilarious, because she is a vampire.

Anastasia Yermakova, 16, created "The Backward Wedding," in which a headstrong bride gets her groom to prove his love by agreeing to get married in the guise of a woman, while she dresses as the man.

"Invasion" by Maxim Kazarin, 13, and Dmitry Terentyev, 12, pitted two teenage computer geeks against aliens emerging from the bowels of the earth, while "Gentle Alexei" by Yury Aristov, 16, observed the transformation of a detective when he comes up against unexpected obstacles.

Grigory Kuznetsov, 16, created a mash-up of new and old by bringing the gods of Olympus down to modern-day Russia where nobody recognizes them or cares about them. In order to woo his sweetheart, Dionysius battles Zeus and contemporary thugs alike.

"I liked taking part in this program because it gives me a chance to test myself and express myself," Kuznetsov said during the press conference.

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