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Remembering Igor Popov

By John Freedman

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I was not here to see Igor Popov's great early work. I am not able to provide a personal, rounded account of his accomplishments. I did not know him. I cannot provide insights into his character or his biography.

But this I know: When Igor Popov died on January 1 at the age of 76 we lost one of the great Russian theater artists of the last half-century.

Popov's design work is so closely entwined with the productions of Anatoly Vasilyev that the latter's name tends to eclipse the former's for all but specialists in the field. But one can't help but wonder if the Vasilyev we know would exist at all without Popov.

The designer and the director came together at the beginning of their careers. Vasilyev, still a student in the early 1970s, came into contact with Popov, an architect who had studied in Novosibirsk but was then working at an experimental engineering institute in Moscow. According to Polina Bogdanova, whose book "The Logic of Time. Anatoly Vasilyev: Between the Past and Future" I lean on for many of the older facts in this blog, it was Popov's wife Olga

Dzisko who can take indirect credit for the introduction.

Dzisko introduced Popov to some young directors who had come to do student work at the Soviet Army Theater where she was an actress. They, in turn, introduced Popov to Vasilyev.

Their collaboration began with one of those curiosities that suit legend well. Again according to Bogdanova, Vasilyev was invited by Oleg Yefremov to help him stage a play called "Solo for a Clock With Chimes" at the Moscow Art Theater. Yefremov asked the young director who he would like to have design the show. Vasilyev said he wanted either the well-known Boris Messerer or Sergei Barkhin. Yefremov said that was impossible and Vasilyev countered by suggesting the utterly unknown and untried Popov. Yefremov agreed and, in 1973, with the soon-to-be-legendary production of "Solo for a Clock With Chimes," the wheels of history were set in motion.

The duo created two shows at the Moscow Art Theater (a third was not completed) and then they moved together to the Stanislavsky Drama Theater where they unleashed on the Moscow public several of the era's most famous and influential productions — "Vassa Zheleznova — First Version" (1978), "A Young Man's Grown-up Daughter" (1979) and "Cerceau" (1985).

When Vasilyev founded his own theater, the School of Dramatic Art, in 1987, Popov was appointed chief designer. He not only created the sets for all of Vasilyev's important productions there — beginning with "Six Characters in Search of an Author" in 1987 and concluding with Vasilyev's last production at the School of Dramatic Art, "The Stone Angel" in 2008 — he rebuilt and redesigned the venues in which these works were performed. Popov also worked with Vasilyev abroad, designing the stage space for the director's famous productions of "The Masquerade" at the Comedie Francaise (1992) and "Uncle's Dream" at the Budapest Art Theater (1994).

If you have ever spent more than five minutes in the School of Dramatic Art's small space on Povarskaya Ulitsa (1987-2008) or in the large venue on Sretenka Ulitsa (opened 2001) you have a clear sense of Popov's artistic vision — a spectacular mix of tradition and eclecticism, and an unerring sense of precision.

Filled with admiration, I wrote about the Sretenka plant in this blog space a few years ago. And I can repeat here more or less what I wrote there — that it is impossible for me to enter the doors of this stunning theater space without my pulse beginning to race a little faster. Popov, working with Vasilyev of course, created a place whose walls, windows and doors are embedded with humor, majesty, spirituality, wisdom and deep humanity. In every turn the building takes one feels the influence of intelligence and the touch of a human hand.

In principle at least, Popov was set for a professional reunion with Vasilyev, who left the theater he founded in 2008 following a rancorous break with city officials. Under the administration of Sergei Kapkov, the Moscow Culture Committee is now working to return Vasilyev to his original space on Povarskaya Ulitsa. Tenants who moved in when Vasilyev was expelled have now been moved to other quarters, and plans are being made to reconfigure the space to suit Vasilyev in a new era.

Popov was to be part of this process. He had toured the old space with Vasilyev and the two

were known to be discussing necessary changes and restorations.

Vasilyev on January 2 posted his pained reaction to the news on the Facebook page of Nadezhda Kalinina.

"When someone close to you dies you are seized by a kind of numbness — you don't know what to say! Better to busy yourself with something simple. Fill out documents for the deceased, buy land for a grave, order a coffin, sit in a trolley that rarely comes by and head out on a route you've never traveled. You don't want to talk and when someone asks you about the deceased — how he died, of what — it's better to wince and remain silent... What can you answer? You look back and it's as though you haven't lived at all, you don't have a single memory. Everything is obtuse, lacking in images and lacking in color..."

Vasilyev's remembrance concludes: "Forty-two years together. From 'Solo for a Clock With Chimes' at the Art Theater to 'Therese the Philosopher' at the Odeon. From Kamergersky Lane to the very outer limits, whether east or west. From models within models to buildings on squares, and from monuments to churches. From the 'Iron curtain' to a world without curtains. From morning to night and from night to morning, from soft drinks to vodka, from youth to old age. A very close person left this life, my stepbrother in theater, an artist, an architect by the name of Igor — in the Slavic fashion, 'Blessed Prince.'"

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