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Hanging Tough in Russia

By John Freedman

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I could have written about any number of things this week. For example, how theatrical was ice skater Yevgeny Plyushchenko's "retirement"? Why lace panties may be banned from production or import beginning July 2014, and what that means for Russian culture and politics. Or, why, according to a new poll, 60% of Americans have a negative attitude towards Russia, and why the feeling among Russians these days is pretty much mutual.

When faced with the moral compulsion to take on the serious problems of the day I often drift back in memory to my days as a student of Russian literature. This was in the 1970s and 1980s. And at that time one of the things for which I was taught to love and respect Boris Pasternak was that he withdrew. The way we learned it was that he had the courage to withdraw. He watched a lot of his collegues die, kill themselves or be killed. And he stepped back away from the edge.

True, he peered back out over the crevice again at the end of his life when he wrote and published his novel "Doctor Zhivago." By the way, "Zhivago" tells the story of a poet who backs away from the pressing issues of his time and immerses himself in personal joys

and sorrows.

I'm trying to say two very different things here: 1) I am backing off the big-click topics this week and 2) I and my fellow students of Russian literature were taught not to judge people's lives. We judged what their lives produced. Mayakovsky threw himself into the maelstrom and was a great poet. Pasternak recoiled and was a great poet, too. It was Pasternak who coined a phrase that I especially love to quote: "Life is no stroll through a field."

That's an extraordinarily Russian-sounding phrase to me, with its simplicity, its inherent wisdom, and, not least of all, its implicit visual image — a beautiful, rolling field of grass or wheat that may well bordered on all sides by thick, dark even foreboding woods.

Photo by John Freedman

Teatr.doc, where this photo was taken during the Lyubimovka festival in September, is not the only Moscow theater with a dedicated audience.

"What makes people what they are?" is a question that makes sense to me. Not "why aren't people something else?" "Why don't they do differently?" and surely not the abominable "Why aren't they more like me?"

For weeks now I've been looking for a reason to write about Russian tenacity, a quality I deeply admire. In a very short period I saw three productions that ran way "too" long without intermissions. You see something like that once and you consider it an aberration. When it happens three times in barely over a month, you realize there must be a method to the madness.

For the record the shows were "Hamlet" (three and a half hours) and "Dead Souls" (two hours, fifty minutes) at the Gogol Center, and "Hamlet/Collage" (two hours, 45 minutes) at the Theater of Nations. They were not like other long shows I have seen in the past — for example, Robert Wilson's four-and-a-half-hour "Civil Wars" or Ivo van Hove's six-hour "Roman Tragedies," both of which allowed for audience members to leave and come back again whenever they wished. No, these were sit-down-and-stick-with-it shows.

I have been among audiences — not Russian — that grumbled when a show passed 60 minutes without a break. I often think of them when routinely watching three-and-a-half hour shows with a single intermission. But three hours or more with no break? That says something about people and the way they live.

Russians are hungry for experience and for knowledge and they are willing to "pay" for it with their time and attention.

Let's consider it simple good fortune that, as I paused a moment while writing this piece, I went onto Facebook for a mindless respite. And there, almost as a gift wrapped with a bow, I found a brand new post by the ever interesting Pavel Rudnev, one of the most thoughtful commentators on Russian theater and culture today. He told about attending a lecture on Pushkin by the Russian poet Olga Sedakova and how the large crowd was inspired by the topic and the formal, but direct, manner of communication.

"There were a lot of people there and it was wonderful," Rudnev wrote. "Everyone listened and took [the lecture] to heart. People miss this kind of communication terribly. Sedakova offers a high level of intellect that is erased in the structure of contemporary media, a voice that these days is not heard unless you make a special effort to hear it."

Rudnev's comments evoked a response from St. Petersburg critic and educator Nikolai Pesochinsky that I think is every bit as germaine to my topic. "It's important that there's no reason to be too condescending with spectators or listeners. They are smarter and more tolerant than is generally considered," he noted.

Yes. This has always amazed and inspired me. The audiences I encounter in Russia are, indeed, smart and tolerant. They come into the hall with a rich understanding that life is not merely a matter of crossing fields.

I'm not painting fairy tales here. I've also seen rude, intolerant audiences shouting out loud at shows they don't like, before getting up and leaving demonstrably.

But it all emanates from the same source — a deep curiosity and a passion for something of meaning. Of all the worthwhile places I can think of being, one of the best is to be among an audience of Russians being pushed too far. It's a great place to withdraw to.

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