

Twenty Years of the Fomenko Studio in Print and Pictures

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March 02, 2014

The  Moscow Times

Everybody knows what happens to the best laid plans devised by men and mice. They go awry. Robert Burns taught us that. John Steinbeck reminded us of it. And life itself brings down the hammer on that one daily.

I had every intention to bypass politics today, and I will stick to that promise. Eventually. But first, however, I have no choice but to take a short detour.

Among other things, I wrote last week about an open letter signed by several prominent Russian performers that called for the arrest of rebels in Ukraine. Thanks to the journalistic sleuths at Rain (Dozhd) TV, it was [revealed](#) on Friday that this letter was at least doctored, if not falsified. Both the singer Iosif Kobzon and the actress Elina Bystritskaya have stated that they did agree to sign a letter warning about dangers in Ukraine, but that the letter read or showed to them contained nothing about arresting anyone.

This has little significant effect on the general point of my last blog, but it is crucial information in regards to Kobzon, Bystritskaya and Vasily Lanovoi, who were victims of someone's political shenanigans. Let that be stated clearly here.

And now, to another topic entirely.

I am this week the proud possessor of two extraordinary new books. That is, one was published in 2008, but is new to me. The other was published in late 2013 and is, well, it's new. The former is called "Fomenko Studio: Collected Works" and was printed on the occasion of the theater's 15th anniversary. The latter bears the title of "Fomenki.ru: Collected Works, Volume Two" and was printed to mark the theater's ongoing 20th anniversary.

These are oversized, richly illustrated coffee table books that provide a wealth of information about the popular Pyotr Fomenko Studio. Together, the volumes tell the story of this theater from its "prehistorical" days as a class of students studying with Fomenko at the Russian Academy of Theater Arts at the beginning of the 1990s, right on through the premiere of Vladimir Nabokov's "The Gift" in September 2012, the first show to open at the theater following the death of Fomenko in August of that year.

Compiled and edited with loving care and a sharp eye for detail by Anastasia Sergeyeva, the theater's literary director, the publications reprint selected reviews and articles about each of the Studio's productions, and provide detailed bibliographies of all, or nearly all, of the press that each show garnered.

Thus we can go back to see what Oleg Tabakov wrote about the student production of "Vladimir of the Third Degree" in the Stage and Screen (Ekran i Stsena) newspaper in December 1991.

"I realize," the famous actor and present-day artistic director of the Moscow Art Theater wrote, 'that my red-cheeked critics and skeptics of all colors might ask suspiciously, 'What has he gone on chirping about without end? How is that he saw no defects in this show?' You know what? I wasn't looking for defects. I watched with interest, I was charmed and I was grateful. At times I laughed — I laughed wholeheartedly, thrilling in the lively and richly human collisions."

You can find that on page 24 of Volume One.

Or we can leaf forward to page 448 in the same volume (that's only the middle of the book!) to read Jean-Pierre Thibaudat's feature about Ksenia Kutepova in the French newspaper Liberation on Oct. 9, 2005. This particular piece was published in connection with a tour of Fomenko's production of Leo Tolstoy's "Family Happiness" at the Teatre le Gemeaux in Paris in 2005, five years after the show had premiered in Moscow.

"When this role was created," writes Thibaudat, "Ksenia was a young woman. In the time that has passed the character and the actress have become friends. They have many memories that they can share together."

Thibaudat is a frequent contributor to both volumes. His articles, like those of many other non-Russian critics and journalists, are printed in the original and in Russian translation

in columns standing side-by-side.

Here is what the French critic wrote about the death of Fomenko in Theatre et Balagan: "No one else carried so high, so far and so finely the legacy of Russian theater, the gold book left unfinished by Stanislavsky..."

Volume Two, printed on glossy paper and illustrated with sumptuous color photographs, includes thumbnail portraits of 87 actors who performed in shows between 1993 and 2013. Also listed, with dates and credits, are all 44 productions mounted under the banner of the Fomenko Studio from Jan. 1990 to Sept. 2013.

These collected works of the Fomenko Studio are both a souvenir for fans and a treasure trove of information for professionals. The books were published in a limited run but there are plans to make them available to the general public.

If you have spent even half as much time in this theater enthralled by the work of its directors and actors, you'll know what joy I feel holding these two fat books in my hands today.

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