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New Yorker Brings Yekaterinburg Play to Moscow

By John Freedman

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Nicole Kontolefa is a New Yorker born and bred. One might say, however, that at least part of her heart lies in Moscow. She was a resident of Moscow for four years while she studied at the Moscow Art Theater School and she is a member of the Art Theater's Studio Six, which is based in New York.

You may recall my writing about Kontolefa last fall when she produced, directed and acted in a one-woman show called "I Am Me." The piece was performed in Prospect Park in Brooklyn, where she led a group of spectators on something of a wild goose chase in search of a few simple, but important, human truths.

On Saturday Muscovites had the opportunity to witness a completely different version of the play, performed at the ZIL Culture House as part of the New Plays project of the Golden Mask Festival. Instead of meeting spectators on the steps of Brooklyn's Central Library

and then taking them on a journey through the paths and lawns of Prospect Park, in Moscow Kontolefa met up with her spectators at ZIL's coatrack and, rather like the Pied Piper, drew them along after her as she transformed corridors, stairwells, a small stage, the outdoors and a working library into her own, constantly changing performance space.

I had the pleasure on Friday of seeing Kontolefa perform the first and only run-through she had a chance to conduct before the two shows she played on Saturday. Dancing as she teased and cajoled her audience, she used spectators as partners — one man becoming a solider sent off to war, one woman becoming a book she read late into the night.

"I Am Me" is a kind of low-octane "road movie," if you will. As Kontolefa told me in a conversation after the Friday run-through, "it's a monologue about a walk." It is the inner story of a young woman interacting deeply with whatever the world brings her — a library book, food, walls, strangers in a city bus.

When Kontolefa was still planning to produce the play, the author wrote her, "The play is about loneliness and how you have to cherish every moment, and how we are, at the same time, this tiny, insignificant thing and a huge universe... Our little soul is its own universe."

It took years for Kontolefa to actually stage the play. She first came across a copy in English translation on the internet in 2006 and it interested her immediately, as "when you meet a person that feels like an old friend."

But, as she told me, her training as a member of an ensemble kept leading her away from attempting to perform a one-woman show. She was, she said, afraid of it because "it's a one-person show and I thought that meant I had to stand on a stage and talk at people. That sounded scary and quite possibly boring."

Another event, however, prompted her to overcome her reticence. Chichkanova, not yet 30, committed suicide in Yekaterinburg in late 2012, and Kontolefa found herself battling the confused and confusing emotions that such an act forces upon all.

She had "complex feelings" when she learned of the death. She admits even to feeling "self-pity" for losing the opportunity to work on the piece with the author. However, even though she never makes New Year resolutions, she resolved to do the play in 2013. "Nine months later I was performing it in Brooklyn," she states.

To keep the record open: The translation of "I Am Me" that Kontolefa discovered on the internet was mine.

Click on the image above to watch a video of my talk with Kontolefa.

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