

Moscow English Theatre Enters Second Year With New Production

By [Peter Beck](#)

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Jonathan Bex, right, with Lord Melvyn Bragg and actress Emma Dallow.

When the Moscow English Theatre resumes its association with the Mayakovsky Theater this coming weekend for the Moscow premiere of Joe Penhall's award-winning drama "Blue/Orange," artistic director Jonathan Bex is optimistic that he has chosen the correct production to advance the company's already considerable standing with Moscow's theater-going public.

As it has done throughout the past year with the very well-received productions of "Educating Rita" and "2013: A Space Oddity," the MET aims to offer quality professional theater in the English language by presenting plays that are established, topically relevant, and entertaining. In Bex's opinion, "Blue/Orange" fits the bill perfectly on all counts.

"We always like to take plays that have been a success in London's West End," he said. "And this show was hailed as "the play of the 2000s."

Set in a psychiatric hospital, "Blue/Orange" deals with contemporary themes such as the pressures of modern urban life, power relationships in the workplace, and issues of race. It is challenging, but Bex does not think it is prohibitively so.

"Despite these weighty topics," he said, "it is also very witty, with exciting, bristling dialogue that should thrill our Moscow audiences."

"Blue/Orange" will see Bex working with director Gary Sefton for the first time in Moscow, though they have collaborated previously in Britain.

"I have worked with Gary on a number of projects in the past," said Bex, "and since then he has gained quite a profile working with numerous theatre companies in Britain, including the Royal Shakespeare Company."

Getting Sefton involved in this production was about more than just working with a familiar face, however. Bex thinks that Sefton's approach to directing is particularly suited to this project.

"I recall him once saying how as a director he looks to tell the story clearly but also engage the audience through visual images — that an audience long after having seen a show will remember the visual impact of it more than the words spoken. "Blue/Orange" involves a lot of talking and I felt Gary's deft touch would lighten that and make it more exciting and engaging for an audience."

The cast will feature Bex himself, as well as Jonathan Cliffe and Tosin Olomowewe. Cliffe trained at the Scottish Royal Academy and Olomowewe is a recent graduate from the London Academy of Music & Drama, or LAMDA.

"For Tosin's role," Bex said, "we needed an actor with the ability to capture both the vulnerability and unpredictable aggressiveness of the character. Gary contacted a casting agent in Britain who called in six young, black actors from various agencies. Tosin stood out."

According to Bex, Olomowewe is particularly pleased to be performing the role here. "This is his first visit to Moscow and he is enthralled by the place. Like many British actors, he says it is always exciting to play in the city that was home to Stanislavsky and Chekhov, the granddaddies of the modern acting tradition."

Should Olomowewe find himself returning to Moscow to reprise the role in the future, there would be no lack of precedent for such an occurrence. Emma Dallow of "Educating Rita" fame has so enjoyed her visits to Moscow — "she has fallen in love with place," said Bex — that she has made herself available for yet another revival of what has now become the MET signature piece in May.

"We have had three sell-out seasons of "Educating Rita" but still people say, 'when are you playing it again as we missed it last time,'" explained Bex. "Schools as well have said, 'we have students who were too young to see it last year so when will you play it again?' It also gives us a chance to expand our audience base."

If all goes according to plan, Bex expects that this ever-expanding audience base will have the opportunity to experience two more new productions later this year after the run

of "Blue/Orange" and the return of "Educating Rita."

The first will be a production of "Relatively Speaking," Alan Ayckbourn's 1970's "comedy of illicit relationships and misunderstandings set in a summer English garden," that Bex hopes

to have ready for a Moscow debut by September or October.

"Ayckbourn is possibly Britain's most prolific playwright ever and we feel his very English brand of light comedy will work very well here," said Bex.

Following that, work will begin on a production of the classic whodunit murder mystery "Sleuth" by Antony Shaffer that Bex intends to raise the curtain on in December. "By then we are hoping to be in a larger performance space at the Mayakovsky," he said, and then added, "whose ever-helpful staff we must thank for their support."

This evolving partnership between the MET and the Mayakovsky takes another important step forward with opening of "Blue/Orange" on Saturday, and it is clear that even greater progress is anticipated for the future.

"Blue/Orange" will be performed at 5 p.m. and 8 p.m. on Saturday, April 5, and at 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. on Sunday, April 6, at Mayakovsky Theater, Bolshaya Nikitskaya 19/13.

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