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Kultura Newspaper Condemns Contemporary Theater Again

By John Freedman

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Igor Bychkov plays Milosz in “Marina” at the Gogol Center, one of several plays attacked by Alexander Andryukhin in a recent Kultura newspaper story.

I forced myself to read the entire article. It was not easy to do. But it had to be done.

The Culture newspaper, which made headlines in April by attacking 29 contemporary Russian writers and directors as propagators of "sleaze, obscenities and perversion," is at it again. This time a long essay, published on Thursday, attacked the Gogol Center, Moscow's newest and, by many accounts, most innovative theater.

When I talked to colleagues about the odious April attacks, most everyone said, "Oh, just ignore it! You can't fight that kind of ignorance. Don't try!" More than a few said how glad they were for those whom the paper attempted to smear. "What better advertisement?" they asked.

Call me old-fashioned. I find this kind of glorification abhorrent.

The latest piece, penned by poet, pulp novelist and journalist Alexander Andryukhin, and entitled "Theater With Hooves," fairly drips with a cocktail of disgust, squeamishness and a holier-than-thou attitude. The author is indignant about the possibility that performers at Gogol Center may use obscenities on stage, and smugly warns fans of such pleasures that a law is coming on July 1 to ban them. He is equally horrified that the theater has "not forgotten about gay pleasures," and that it occasionally dares to hint at what I believe most people consider rather common heterosexual practices.

The author quotes a Moscow mother as saying that her school-aged son began using expletives in his speech after attending a performance of Kirill Serebrennikov's production of Nikolai Gogol's "Dead Souls," in which "Korobochka offers to perform oral sex on Chichikov."

Based on the logic of my friends who suggested I not worry so much about the April attacks, I can say that the young director Zhenya Berkovich should be especially proud. Two of her productions, "Russian Beauty," based on the famous novel by Viktor Yerofeyev, and "Marina," a play by Lyuba Strizhak, are both singled out as productions worthy of condemnation. Mr. Andryukhin makes it a point to declare that the audience on the evening he attended the latter show, was made up mostly of young female students and "a few youths with prissy mannerisms."

In his discussion of "Russian Beauty," Andryukhin hearkens back to his school days when, presumably, he had occasion to write short book reports.

"The main heroine cavorts on mattresses and, swallowing words, imitates a stormy temperament," the critic writes, suggesting that all the shows at Gogol Center are made according to one model. "The level of acting is that of amateur school theater. A song in French doesn't even help. Moreover, the live guitarist sometimes misses the strings when strumming — that must be his crow's mask getting in the way. In sum, the heroine again dies and, once again, it's not clear why. Either she suffocated from running in the guise of Joan of Arc or she couldn't survive sex with the dead Leonardo."

My friends are going to lose all patience with me. Why, they will ask, do you bother quoting drivel like that? Anybody can make fun of anything if they are so inclined! And they are right, and I know they are right, and yet I cannot let this pass without saying to those who do not know, and who might be interested: This is what is happening to Russian culture. The level of the conversation has dropped through the floor.

In fact, conversation, as an attempt to communicate, to share ideas and impressions, is simply dead. "Conversation" these days is a weapon, a tool for knocking down those you do not understand. Intolerance, ridicule and attack are the names by which the tools go.

Several people commenting on this and similar recent articles on Facebook — the actor Alexei Dovotchenko, the critic Anya Banasyukevich, and director-playwright Mikhail Ugarov — pointed out that the newest genre of theater criticism has become the denunciation. Ah, yes, that trusty genre from the era of the Purges. And, indeed, Mr. Andyukhin concludes his article by invoking Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin: "Eh, someone ought to tell Gogol about this... Or

at least Sobyanin."

Pardon me while I go take a shower to wash myself with antiseptic soap. Only then will I be able to return to this computer.

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