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Lyubimovka Marks Real Start of Theater Season

By John Freedman

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The Lyubimovka play festival is famous for its eager audiences packing into small rooms to hear new works.

It's not quite true that the Lyubimovka play festival is the first real event of each theater season in Moscow. This year, for example, some 10 top venues, including the Moscow Art Theater, the Mayakovsky and the Gogol Center, are already up and running.

Historically Lyubimovka wasn't even held in the fall. It was usually an early summer bash held outside the city at Konstantin Stanislavsky's old country estate that bore the name of Lyubimovka — hence the festival's name.

But about a decade ago the whole shebang was moved to the tiny Teatr.doc, which is tucked into a basement not far from either Pushkin Square or Triumfalnaya Ploshchad. Ever since it may or may not have been each season's first big event, but it's definitely become the sign that let's everybody know: Moscow theater is back in business!

And now for a bit of a shocker for anyone who still insists on seeing Lyubimovka as a runny-nosed upstart, an organizational hooligan, a noisy few days of grumpy writers grousing in dramatic form about the way things are: This year marks the festival's 25th anniversary. Lyubimovka is a quarter of a century old. The great poet Mikhail Lermontov, for God's sake, died at the age of 27!

I am willing to guess no such calamity is in the stars for Lyubimovka. As of last year it is in new hands — it's now run by playwright Mikhail Durnenkov — and it has taken on something of a new feel. There is less of the good, old haphazard let's-see-what-happens-here, and more coordination and organization. For example, in principle, if you want to be assured of having a seat at the evening readings beginning on Saturday and running through Sept. 14, you must — gulp! — actually reserve and register your seat!

Such sophistication!

But in reality it will be a madhouse as ever. How do I know? Because 10 days before the festival was to begin, every available seat for every evening reading was already spoken for.

Anyway, before anyone accuses Lyubimovka of going glossy, let's read a little deeper in the new rules. Yes, those 60 early birds who reserved seats are guaranteed a place to sit. But the rest of the crowd hanging around outside will still crash the joint, as ever, once the expeditious 60 have deigned to take their seats.

In other words, at the top events expect to see 130 or more people crammed into the basement, sitting on windowsills, pillows, fold-up chairs, hardwood floors, each other's knees and each other's feet. All places, reserved, usurped, borrowed or stolen, are still free of charge.

The schedule of readings in this 25th version of the festival include fewer big names than has been the rule in the past few years, which brings the whole enterprise back in line with its original goal: to discover new writers and plays we know nothing about. The big stars this year will be Pavel Pryazhko with "Karina and Dron" on Saturday, Yaroslava Pulinovich with "Charonschoir" on Monday, Ivan Vyrypayev with "What I Learned from Snakes" on Tuesday, and Yury Klavdiyev with "Yap and Roar" on Sept. 14.

But the meat of the enterprise, as usual, will be the readings of plays by new writers still in the process of building reputations. In all there will be 29 readings, five master classes for writers, one production — "Lyubimovka. Diagnostica," a so-called "performance of witness" — and two special events that promise to blur the lines between readings, performances and happenings.

"Lyubimovka. Diagnostica" plays Sept. 12 at 9 p.m. at the Meyerhold Center. "Lyubimovka Psychonight," an all-night, nonstop event, presents six plays by six authors one after the other starting at 11 p.m. at the same venue. The festival concludes with a so-called collection of novellas, "Lyubimovka. The First Quarter," on Sept. 14 at 9 p.m. at club Masterskaya, located at 3 Teatralny Proyezd.

Worry not: All seats for all these events are already spoken for, too. So just get there early and slither forward as best you can when the mass of humanity starts its move toward

the basement. Rubbing elbows is half the fun. Happy 25th, Lyubimovka!

Aside from the three events mentioned above, the Lyubimovka festival runs from Saturday to Sept. 14 daily from 3 p.m. to midnight at Teatr.doc, located at 11/13 Tryokhprudny Pereulok. Metro Pushkinskaya, Mayakovskaya. 926-387-0206. Lubimovka.ru*.*

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