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Authorities Again Threatened by Bolotnaya Square

By John Freedman

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Yelena Gremina's production of "The Bolotnaya Square Case" at Teatr.doc may be the most benign dangerous 65 minutes I have ever witnessed.

A contradiction in terms, you say?

Not in the land, which, as the great poet Fyodor Tyutchev put it, cannot be understood by mind alone.

The fact is that the Russian authorities, clearly alarmed, have gone after Teatr.doc again.

Pulling levers, from the city property department to the Ministry of Culture, the powers that be pushed Doc and its repertoire of socially and politically themed productions out of its famous space near Pushkin Square in December. Perhaps they then heaved a sigh of relief. As if to say, "Phew! We're done with them!"

Ha!

Doc reopened in a new space on Razgulyai Ploshchad in early February. They have been pumping out new shows ever since.

The latest, "The Bolotnaya Square Case," references legal battles that have dragged on between the state and protesters ever since a notorious, violent protest took place May 6, 2012, on Bolotnaya Square.

The police showed up at the theater the day before the May 6 opener. They said they received "a signal." That meant checking for bombs and similar bits of theatrical intrigue, just as the authorities did in December. Finding nothing, they let rehearsals continue, but informed Doc they "would be back."

They kept their word.

When I arrived 40 minutes early for the premiere, six uniformed policeman stood watch on the street. Officers in civilian clothes were busy on cell phones, checking people out, conducting constant conversations with someone, somewhere. They were still there when the show ended, still talking to someone, and the next day they returned in force — sending three separate teams of investigators looking into everything Doc might be up to, checking posters, rental agreements, books, papers and asking questions.

The three teams spent six hours interrogating Gremina and her colleagues. And when Gremina returned home in the final hour of the day, she made a jaunty post on her Facebook page, reminding fans that the authorities cannot legally close her theater, and, even if they do, she'll open another.

So what was this all about?

The performance begins with a short video of protesters on Moscow's streets, but it would be hard to imagine anything more low-key and non-political than "Bolotnaya Square." Written by Yekaterinburg playwright Polina Borodina, based on interviews with family members of those who are in prison on convictions in the Bolotnaya Square case, this is a warm, sad, deeply human performance piece.

Gremina hung the stage with hammocks and put out a few table lamps, giving the space the feel of a place inhabited by individuals engaged in common tasks — resting, talking, taking part in personal hobbies.

The four actors — Marina Boiko, Konstantin Kozhevnikov, Anastasia Patlai and Varvara Faer — share the roles of mothers, sisters and fathers of those languishing in prison. There is no attempt to match the sex of the actors to those they play, a simple device that gives the performance an added sense of democracy.

It's not "who" here that counts, it's "what."

We hear a young woman's story of navigating bureaucracy to marry her sweetheart in prison. We listen to a sister who adores her brother. We hear words of love a prisoner wrote in a letter to his grandparents. We hear parents worry about their children, chastising them some, but making sure all understand how proud they are of them.

This is the human, personal side of what happens after politics hit. This is where families are shattered, lives are crippled, precious years are stolen from lives, and individuals are stuck dealing with the wreckage on their own.

Teatr.doc is known for its anti-theatrical stance, its attempts to put real life on stage. But "Bolotnaya Square" goes farther than anything they have done in the past. There is virtually no "theater" in this piece — only human beings speaking from the heart about the difficulties encountered by people following their conscience.

The only traditional theater taking place the night I attended was the spectacle put on by the sole performers in costume — the policemen milling around inside and outside the theater.

"The Bolotnaya Square Case" (Bolotnoye Delo) plays Mon., May 22, June 19 and 24 at 8 p.m. at Teatr.doc, located at 3 Spartakovskaya Ulitsa, Bldg. 3. Metro Kurskaya, then free shuttle bus on the Garden Ring Road to metro Baumanskaya. Tel. 916-653-0989. teatrdoc.ru. Running time: 1 hour, 5 minutes.

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