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Immersive Theater Takes Hold in Moscow

By Andrei Muchnik

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Black Russian **Ivan Gushchin**

Moscow theater, usually receptive to innovative forms, has taken a little while to catch on to immersive theater. But this season the tide has turned, with homegrown productions and visiting directors putting the genre firmly on the cultural map.

Immersive theater became the new buzz phenomenon after a British company called Punchdrunk produced a highly successful show in New York City — "Sleep No More" (2011). A largely wordless production, the play was loosely based on Macbeth and involved audience members following actors through the rooms of an abandoned warehouse on West 27th Street. An immediate sensation, a flurry of productions inspired by the performance soon appeared around the globe.

And now it's Moscow's turn to embrace this trend. "Black Russian," directed by critically

acclaimed Maxim Didenko, was the first immersive theater production to hit the capital this season. The play premiered in September at the splendid 19th century Spiridonov House off Tverskaya Ulitsa.

Didenko is best known for his unorthodox and post-modernist productions that combine elements of traditional theater, musical and even contemporary dance. His show "Black Russian" is based on "Dubrovsky," the unfinished novel by Alexander Pushkin, about a noble highway robber who seeks to avenge his father after he is swindled from his property by a spiteful and powerful neighbor, Troyekurov.

"Black Russian," however, focuses on the more carnal aspects of the novel: hunting, bear fighting and Dubrovsky's affair with Troyekurov's daughter, Masha. The role is played in the production by one of the most recognizable actresses on the current theater scene, Ravshana Kurkova. The remaining cast members are played by actors from the Praktika and Gogol Center theaters, as well as Brusnikin's Workshop.

The viewers, dubbed "guests," are asked to don the mask of either an owl, a deer or a fox for the duration of the experience. Their choice determines which character's path — Troyekurov, Dubrovsky or Masha — they will follow during the performance.

It's a sensory experience in the fullest sense of the word. Aside from a number of striking visual effects, you are also invited to taste a variety of menacingly dark foods during the production, which are almost unrecognizable in the dark lighting. While you wander the house in the footsteps of your character you can actually smell pancakes, freshly mown hay and flowers — as if you were indeed in a Russian country mansion.

The music is the work of Ivan Kushnir, who has worked with Didenko on a number of previous productions. Meanwhile, Yevgeny Kulagin — best known for his work with Kirill Serebrennikov on "Muller Machine," probably the most scandalous production at Gogol Center — masterminded the choreography.

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While also set in a 19th century mansion, "The Revenants," by American company Journey Lab, liberates the audience from choosing just one character to follow. Instead, you are left to meander through four floors and fifty rooms as you wish.

The production premiered earlier this month and is based on Henrik Ibsen's "Ghosts," a play that deals with themes of morality, incest and euthanasia. Directors Victor Carinha and Mia Zanette spent several months in Moscow working closely with Russian producers on the project.

Some of the rooms replicated the interior of a typical Nordic house, while others are reminiscent of a dreamscape or a nightmare. The music was written by popular indie-pop artist Anton Beliayev and his band Therr Maitz.

Ibsen's story about a family reunion gone wrong is told from several points of view

simultaneously. The viewer sees only snatched fragments of the tragedy and has to puzzle it together. It's a rather draining experience, and if you find yourself needing a break, you are allowed to stop by the bar downstairs for a refreshment.

A warning: be prepared for nudity. You're likely to stumble upon at least one orgy as you navigate the capacious set.

"Black Russian" runs through Jan. 12 at Spiridonov House. 9/8 Maly Gneznikovsky Pereulok. Metro Tverskaya, Pushkinskaya. blackrussianshow.ru

"The Revenants" runs through Jan. 27 at Dashkov 5. 5 Dashkov Pereulok. Metro Park Kultury. dashkov5.ru.

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