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The Italian Who Came Into the Cold

After failing to launch an acting career in Italy, Alessandra Giuntini now stages cosmopolitan theater in provincial Russia

By Emily Erken

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Irina Khramova as Katerina in Giuntini's The Shrew, performing on March 2 at the Meyerhold Center.
Alexandra Airatkina

Russians often claim that Moscow and St. Petersburg are intellectual bubbles, but theater director Alessandra Giuntini's career testifies to the fertile art scene in the country's regions.

The young Italian director has staged plays in a number of provincial cities in European Russia and further afield in Siberia, including Perm, Krasnoyarsk, Kemerovo, Novokuznetsk, and Omsk.

Earlier this month, the Kurgan Drama Theater presented Giuntini's latest work, "The Shrew,"

at the Meyerhold Center as part of the Golden Mask Festival's "Plus" series, which brings out-of-competition stage productions to Moscow from February to April.

Ten years ago, Giuntini left her Tuscan hometown of Pistoia for St. Petersburg in a last-ditch attempt at forging an acting career. After graduating from the Russian State Institute of Performing Arts (and mastering Russian), the budding director finally caught a break in Siberia.

According to the critic and director Oleg Loyevsky, Giuntini's southern cheerfulness gives her an edge in Russia.

"Alessandra is colorful, energetic, and from a different culture. Her Italian optimism is great: It provides relief from the dark Russian mentality where everyone wants to die," he told The Moscow Times.

Giuntini's popularity in frosty Siberia keeps her on the road for most of the year.

The Soviet strategy of using art to "engineer the soul" of a new homo-Sovieticus left a network of theaters in every distant town. In these grand Empire-style buildings, state-supported troupes stage the classics, but they also host theater laboratories to sample new directorial talent.

Vera Senkina, one of the curators of the "Mask Plus" series, says that Siberian theater is determined to evolve and is anything but backward. "Many theaters are orienting themselves toward the capitals, following new trends, and making sure to invite interesting directors," she told The Moscow Times.

In a typical laboratory, young directors produce short sketches with actors from the local troupe in about four days. It's a nerve-wracking process, but for Giuntini, almost every laboratory results in an invitation to stage a full-length play at the theater.

Fish out of water

As an Italian in Siberia, the director is always a bit exotic. Indeed, Giuntini cuts an unusual picture—the petite brunette has a nose ring and wears her buoyant curls lopped off at the ears.

Unfortunately, her unusual appearance and accent have attracted unwanted attention. She has been detained a number of times after police took her for "an immigrant from the Near East," Giuntini told the Tagabout newspaper in an interview. (Her mother is Georgian.) "But when they realized I was Italian, everything immediately changed: I was their best friend, a

favored guest."

At other times, unfamiliarity with the rules or an unwillingness to follow them has also resulted in problems. She was put straight on the first plane back to Krasnoyarsk after landing in the Arctic city of Norilsk, which can only be visited by foreigners with special permission. In St. Petersburg, a migration officer threatened to deport her for turning in residency paperwork one hour too late. After the actress staged an Italian-style meltdown, the officers assuaged her tears—by sending her to court instead.

Giuntini's transformation on Russian soil has come with some difficulty. She describes herself as having been "absolutely wild" before she entered the Theater Academy. "No one could control me... now, I am thoughtful, serious, although for Russians, I am still cheerful," she says.

Mastering the social intricacies of the language also proved challenging. Although Giuntini now speaks near-perfect Russian, Loyevsky recounts how, as an actress fresh out of the theater academy, she filled a formal toast to the governor of the Leningrad region with Russian obscenities. Apparently, she had yet to appreciate the fine distinction between language for the dormitory and for a formal ceremony.

Emotion before realism

Giuntini says her transformation is also cognitive, that she thinks "not in words, but in emotions." This aligns her with a current dramaturgical approach to emotion that rips away Soviet theater's "window into the past." Frenzied actors in surreal costumes abandon filmic realism, depicting not so much characters as interpersonal relationships through dance, song and absurdist comedy. Emotional energy remains central as realist portraits disappear.

This style works best when the audience is already familiar with the original story, as it was for Giuntini's "The Shrew" ("Stroptivaya"), an adaptation of Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew."

In "The Shrew," Giuntini conveys her feminist message without sloganeering or profanity. Her Katerina is a social misfit, a somnambulist surrounded by a chirpy ensemble in white and lurid pink, cheerfully tripping around the stage. Because she is female, the oddball must marry, but only the beastly Petruccio will have her.

Baroque polyphonic music underscores Giuntini's allusions to 17th-century commedia dell'arte—Katerina's shallow sister is the pretty Columbine. Her groom, Petruccio, appears at their wedding in Pierrot the clown's collar and face paint. Pitiable Petruccio leads Katerina, balancing on pointe shoes, into marriage.

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Giuntini's "rosy social tragi-comedy," as she pitched it to the Kurgan Drama Theater, is chock-full of feminism. The director takes a page from Pina Bausch's "Café Muller" by having Katerina repeatedly hurl her body into Petruccio's arms, then crash to the stage with a thud.

Whereas Bausch's work insists that in every heterosexual relationship men oppress women, Giuntini points her critique at society in forming the concepts of femininity and normalcy, women included. Near the end of the play, a video projector shows clips of middle-aged Russian women defining "what a woman is."

The documentary theater finale brings the surrealism of "The Shrew" into stark reality. As she told The Moscow Times, "I just want the audience to think, and if they will be angry, that would also be good."

The benefits of censorship

Despite Giuntini's progressive outlook and multiple run-ins with the police, the director embraces the limitations of Russian life.

"In some sense, it's good that there is censorship in Russia," Giuntini told the SuperOmsk newspaper. "The brain starts working, you have to push your imagination further to overcome obstacles and express your thoughts."

Giuntini has yet to stage a full-length play in St. Petersburg or Moscow, although she hints that her debut may not be far away. But until then, the 33-year-old director remains optimistic, and praises the theater world of her adopted homeland for its ability to persevere.

"In the long run, everything gets done. There will be complications, something [wrong] with the budget, another thing appears, but in the end, something will happen."

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