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Russia’s Anti-War Theater Artists Search for a New Stage in Exile

By Moscow Times Reporter

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A scene from the play "HANNAH" **hannahperformance.tilda.ws**

BERLIN — By the time the lights went down at the Komische Oper Berlin, there was hardly an empty seat left. Tickets for Kirill Serebrennikov’s 10-day festival of theater had sold out months in advance.

Last month’s festival brought together theater, film and public discussions featuring Russian artists now working abroad, with performances moving between German, Russian and English.

For Serebrennikov, one of the best-known Russian theater directors in Europe, exile has opened a new chapter in an already international career. But for many less-established actors and directors who left Russia after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, exile has meant struggling to find their place in the theater world.

Maya Dorozhenko, 30, had been building a career in Moscow when the invasion began. A director and screenwriter, she graduated from the prestigious GITIS theater school and received invitations to work with leading theaters in the capital.

When the war started, she had been planning to stage an anti-war play based on philosopher Hannah Arendt's life and work, but venues there appeared unwilling to take the risk.

"The play was reviewed and they said it wasn't going to happen. So my actress and I left," she recalled. They moved to Yerevan, Armenia, and rented a room where there was barely enough space to rehearse.

"There was a very narrow space between the bed and the wall. It was a one-woman show, so my actress would perform right in front of me and I would just sit there and watch her performance," she said.

Since the invasion, Russian theaters have faced tighter censorship and state control. Artists who oppose the war have had to weigh the risks of speaking out against the prospect of abandoning careers built over years.

In 2024, theater director Yevgenia Berkovich and playwright Svetlana Petriychuk were sentenced to six years in a penal colony for "justifying terrorism" over their award-winning play about Russian women who fall in love with Islamist militants and plan to join them in Syria. Supporters believe Berkovich's statements against the Ukraine invasion and anti-war poetry were the real reasons for their arrests.

For those who left, Armenia and Georgia, with visa-free entry and large Russian-speaking communities, became hubs for actors and directors.

Among them was actor Yegor Rybakov, 43, who moved to Tbilisi in 2022 after receiving threats on social media that he would be reported to the authorities for his criticism of the Kremlin and support for Ukraine. At the time, he was performing in four productions, including a play ranked in the top 10 best in Moscow.

"I had productions for audiences of around 35 people and others for 5,000. It was a huge, very memorable contrast, and as an actor I loved it," Rybakov told The Moscow Times.

But in Tbilisi, regular acting work was harder to find. He said he took on side jobs as an event host and acting teacher to make a living in between acting gigs.

Opportunities in Russian-language video production were also limited, while working in the local Georgian theater scene meant building new professional connections and often learning another language, he said.

Beyond the language barrier, theater workers told The Moscow Times they also face a choice between making work for Russian-speaking audiences in exile or trying to integrate into the local theater scene and reach new audiences.

Paris-based director Anastasiia Anisimova is one of the few who have managed to break into the international theater scene. Her play "Deep Fake," which is staged in both Russian and English, has been staged in Tbilisi, Berlin and the prestigious Avignon Festival in France, with

an Amsterdam performance planned.

But she said that funding and bureaucratic requirements — even to take part in international festivals — remained major challenges.

“Theater in exile is not about making money at all,” Anisimova said. “You just want to make art and stay in the profession.”

Much of Russian theater in exile reflects on the realities of war and emigration. “Vanya Is Alive” tells the story of the mother of a Russian soldier who was drafted to the war in Ukraine, while “Inostranka” (The Foreigner) and “Letters Home” explore what it means to leave your country.

For some, exile is a way to address political subjects that would otherwise be impossible inside Russia.

Yet not all exiled theater is explicitly political. Anisimova said she “firmly opposed political theater because, for me, it’s simply not how I hear or see the world.” Although she said art and politics are intertwined, she argued that “they don’t necessarily have to be so closely linked.”

The instability of exile has also made it difficult to sustain a production or plan a new one.

“People [in the theater community] are constantly changing. Some move to another country, some stay. That has a huge impact on what you can plan and what you can count on when it comes to rehearsals and projects,” Rybakov said.

Dorozhenko said she has faced many of the same problems. Leaving Russia meant losing the professional environment that had made her work possible, from colleagues and audiences to the networks she had spent years building.

“For four years, you were almost in [professional] isolation. You see people who are also trying to find a way to work, to say something important as artists, but also working as animators, as teachers, doing whatever they can [to survive]. It is still very difficult,” Dorozhenko said.

Theater festivals offer a key way for the community to stay connected after being dispersed by emigration.

Lubimovka, originally a Moscow festival founded in 1990 and dedicated to new Russian-language drama, has developed into an international network of readings and collaborations after the invasion following its decision to move the festival abroad to avoid wartime censorship and to protect writers.

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Its representatives said the independent and nonprofit festival operates mostly as a grassroots initiative from people across the world who want to keep the play reading going and also creates opportunities to reach non-Russian audiences, including across Europe, Asia

and in the U.S.

“These festivals [called Echo of Lubimovka] started to emerge quite spontaneously in exile — it was no longer possible to hold a large event as in Moscow, so people began approaching us with ideas of their own: ‘Let’s do readings of three plays in Tbilisi, let’s read three plays in Tel Aviv.’ And the whole thing kept growing, like a snowball,” Lubimovka said.

“Starting with Echo of Lubimovka in Paris in 2022, we decided to translate the plays into the local language,” the festival’s representatives said, adding that one of the recent examples is an event in Tokyo, where the readings were performed in Japanese and selected by Japanese curators.

“Step by step, these small initiatives across Echo of Lubimovka festivals, in different languages, are also beginning to build connections outside the Russian-speaking world,” they added.

“There is a strong urge to speak out and express ourselves, as well as a need to connect with colleagues and rebuild professional ties in exile,” Lubimovka said.

For the actors and directors interviewed by The Moscow Times, despite the difficulties abroad, they wanted to stay in theater and they still cannot imagine working in wartime Russia.

For Rybakov, the connection with an audience is what makes that effort worthwhile.

“When you feel that response from people, when you see that they’ve been touched by what you’re doing, especially during this terrible time we’re living through, it turns you inside out,” Rybakov said.

“What I love most in the world is when I have acting work, when I’m rehearsing and performing, when I’m shooting. That’s when I’m happy.”

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