CROSSING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN RUSSIAN AND AMERICAN DRAMA

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I have long thought it strange that Russian theatre, with all its desire and ability to soak up outside influences, has virtually no practical understanding of American drama after the 1960s. Ask someone in Moscow what they know about American drama and they’ll say enthusiastically, “I love O’Neill! I love Williams! I love Albee!” Somebody else might toss in, “Arthur Miller!” Then the conversation falls flat.

I can turn this around. Ask most anyone in the American theatre what they know about Russian drama, and in their excitement they’ll cough blood, if you’ll pardon the dicey expression, over Anton Chekhov. Somebody else might say something about Gorky. And then the conversation falls flat.

I’m exaggerating to make a point. But the point is legitimate. Theatre practitioners in Russia and the United States are woefully ignorant of each other. I find it fascinating because each culture has been so heavily influenced by the other—consider Chekhov’s impact on American drama and Eugene O’Neill’s on Russian.

Between 2007 and 2010, I was part of a team that brought contemporary Russian drama to the United States. The project was called “New Russian Drama: Voices in a Shifting Age” and was conducted by the Department of Theatre Arts of Towson University and Philip Arnoult’s Center for International Theatre Development. Robyn Quick and Stephen Nunns, who were instrumental in the seeding and running of the project, have written about it in these pages. As such, there is little reason for me to say more about that now, although a bit of the philosophy behind the project bears repeating.

When Philip Arnoult and I began discussing the possibility of showcasing contemporary Russian drama in the United States, we were moved by a few key notions. First, the focus must be on the practical concerns of theatre, not on scholarly interests. We wanted to see Russian plays produced on American stages. Second, the texts must be in American English, because British English does not “translate” well to American stages. Third, we must avoid the usual path of academic translations that may (or may not) be sufficient for classroom study but which often cannot be spoken by live actors.
Big Love, directed by Georgy Tsnobiladze, ON.TEATR, St. Petersburg, 2011
on a stage. We set ourselves the goal of bringing the living Russian word to life on American stages. No more, no less.

Cut to the Holiday Inn near the Belorusskaya train station in Moscow in April of 2010. I sat in a conference room with Philip Arnoult and Yury Urnov, a Russian director who was another of the moving forces in the Towson-CITD project. All plans were in place for a big project-ending national conference that CITD would host at Towson the second week in May.² Aside from some final tinkering, our three-year project was at an end. These are moments when the only obvious topic of conversation is, “What next?”

I had always seen the Towson-CITD project as a beginning, not an end. I wanted it to start a dialogue, not be an isolated point in time. So Philip, Yury, and I talked about dialogues, cycles, exchanges, and reciprocal acts. What would encourage American theatres to continue exploring Russian drama? Well, that’s easy. You get them involved. We had taken Russian drama to American theatre; now let’s get American theatres to take American drama to Russia. Within minutes, Philip was ticking off play development organizations CITD had worked with over the decades. Moments later, we had a list that included New York Theatre Workshop (NYTW), the Sundance Theatre Institute Program, the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center, and the Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville. To give the project an umbrella title, I think I tossed out the rather obvious phrase “New American Plays for Russia” and we were in business.

Of course, “business” implies money, and here serendipity played its customary role. Out of the blue, I received a call from Michael J. Hurley at the US embassy in Moscow. As the embassy’s Minister Counselor for Public Affairs, he was charged with executing a major new venture that had come about as a result of the “reset button” pushed in 2009 by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.³ He wondered if I had any ideas for cultural programs that could be conducted within a new initiative called the US-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission, or the Obama-Medvedev Commission. I outlined our idea for New American Plays for Russia, and in a matter of days we, indeed, were in business.

The idea was to come up with a digestible number of plays that represented American drama over the last decade. We immediately rejected a potentially media-friendly program presenting modern masters like Sam Shepard, David Mamet, David Henry Hwang, Tony Kushner, and the like. Yes,
they are virtually absent on Russian stages, but there was a matter of competition that I felt was crucial to address. Many countries have conducted important, useful projects promoting their national traditions in Russia. France, Germany, England, Poland, and Finland are just a few of those who have worked hard and successfully to place their contemporary playwrights on Russian stages. I could not imagine coming to the Russian public with a cache of plays from the 1980s and 1990s, no matter how great they were, when the rest of the world was focusing on the present day.

Thus, we decided we would enlist specialists from our American partner organizations to suggest what writers and plays might best represent American drama today. Jim Nicola of NYTW, Christopher Hibma of Sundance, Preston Whiteway of the O’Neill, and Amy Wegener of the Humana Festival visited Moscow in early October 2010. We took them to important Moscow productions including the Valery Fokin/Alexander Bakshi adaptation of The Overcoat at the Sovremennik Theatre and Dmitry Krymov’s The Cow at the School of Dramatic Art; introduced them to important contemporary writers and directors such as Maksym Kurochkin, Yevgeny Kazachkov, Rodion Beletsky, and Georg Genoux; and arranged for them to meet and speak with the Moscow public in the loose format of press conference/lectures. On the final day of the group’s week-long sojourn, Philip and I huddled with everyone in a hotel lobby and put the question to them: “You have seen shows; you have talked to people. Based on that experience, what American plays do you think would have the best chance of being understood here today?”

This last phrase was key. Never did we set ourselves the goal of finding the “best” new American plays. Our program, as Philip said repeatedly, was not a competition. It was a process by which we hoped to ferret out a number of American plays that would reflect American cultural diversity but that could also have resonance in Russian culture. As we had done in the New Russian Drama program at Towson, we would seek practical results. We wanted Russian theatres to stage the plays we would translate.

At least one hundred plays were discussed that day in October, from which a long list of twenty-five was chosen for consideration. These texts were shared among six Russian readers (I was a seventh), who commanded English well enough to read the originals. In December, the readers’ recommendations made it clear to me that we had seven texts—more than expected—that could be included in the final translation stage.
Talk Radio, directed by Odin Lund Biron, Playwright and Director Center, Moscow, 2011
This caused us to make a quick change in plans. Originally, we intended to commission line-by-line translations of eight plays, which were to be evaluated by a second group of Russian experts. From those eight, a final four would be chosen to be adapted professionally by major contemporary playwrights. But, Philip asked with irresistible logic during one long phone conversation, “Why produce four usable texts when you can produce seven?” So we retained our original idea of having translators do line-by-line translations of four plays, from which writers would create Russian adaptations. But we also turned three plays over to Russian playwrights whose command of English allowed them to create performable texts directly.⁴

By September 2011, we had seven new Russian texts to offer to the world. Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The Book of Grace*, translated by Maria Nikolaeva, was adapted by Yury Klavdiev. Annie Baker’s *The Aliens*, translated by Yekaterina Raikova, was adapted by Mikhail Durnenkov. Eric Bogosian’s *Talk Radio*, translated by Anna Shulgat, was adapted by Ivan Vyrypaev.⁵ Adam Rapp’s *Nocturne* was adapted by Maksym Kurochkin in collaboration with me. Charles Mee’s *Big Love* was translated by Sergei Task. Deborah Zoe Laufer’s *End Days* was translated by Nina Belenitskaya with the assistance of her sister, Alexandra Belenitskaya. Nilo Cruz’s *Anna in the Tropics* was translated by Yevgeny Kazachkov.

The translation and adaptation process was this project’s fulcrum. Philip and I always believed this is where we would make or break our goal of reaching Russia’s stages. I matched American to Russian playwrights thinking about their individual sensibilities, outlooks, and styles. It seemed obvious to me that the violent and tender Klavdiev suited Parks beautifully. Baker’s playfulness slipped like a hand into the glove of Durnenkov’s talent for understatement. Bogosian’s monological structure matched Vyrypaev ideally. Who could I turn Rapp’s symphony of language and images over to if not to Maksym Kurochkin? The promising young writers Nina Belenitskaya and Yevgeny Kazachkov had the right approach to humor, history, and culture to take on Laufer and Cruz. Task, in my opinion, is the finest translator of English-language drama into Russian and is capable of inhabiting any writer’s style.

In short, I made my decisions; others would pass judgment on them. That process began in late October when the Fifth Theatre of Omsk hosted public readings of three plays as a part of their bi-annual Young Theatres of
Russia festival. *The Book of Grace* was done as a table reading; *End Days* and *The Aliens* were performed as fully staged readings with costumes, props, and stage business. Responses from actors, spectators, and directors were encouraging. Most of the deeply American aspects in *Grace* and *End Days* now had Russian equivalents that revealed their inner workings. *The Aliens*, directed by the young Ksenia Zorina from Moscow, simply knocked people back in their seats. This “staged reading,” which was rehearsed over a five-day period, was a full-blown performance. In Durnenkov’s adaptation, Baker’s back-lot losers were Russians at heart without ever losing their American underpinnings. By the time I left Omsk two days after this reading, the theatre had resolved to ask Zorina to complete her production. Three days of public presentations and we already had one production scheduled.

We presented staged readings of four plays in Moscow from November 21 to 22, 2011. Olga Galakhova, who coordinated the event for the Playwright and Director Center, had an interesting suggestion. She wanted Americans living in Moscow to bring their understanding to the plays. Therefore, Robyn Quick, in Moscow on a Fulbright grant, directed *The Book of Grace.* Adam Muskin of the Moscow Art Theatre School and New York’s Studio 6 directed *The Aliens.* I had the mad hubris to direct myself in *Nocturne* (and was duly panned in at least two reviews), while Odin Lund Biron, an American actor in the company of the Satirikon Theatre, staged *Talk Radio.* Halls were packed to overflowing. Post-performance discussions were lively, especially with Annie Baker and Mikhail Durnenkov in attendance following the reading of *The Aliens.* Baker was hailed as the “modern, female Chekhov,” and it was not long before an agreement was struck between Baker and the Pushkin Theatre for a fall 2012 production of the play. Two events and two future productions under our collective belts.

Milena Avimskaya, the founder of the feisty new ON.TEATR in St. Petersburg, jumped at the opportunity to host readings from November 25 to 27, 2011. They were timed to coincide with a conference called “American Drama: New Discoveries,” organized by Yulia Kleiman and Nikolai Pesochinsky of the St. Petersburg Theatre Academy. Avimskaya, a woman of extraordinary energy and vision, resolved to present all seven plays during the three days of the conference. In fact, it was one of the first big events ON.TEATR had hosted since moving into its new space on Ulitsa Zhukovskogo in August. As in Moscow, the theatre was a beehive of activity as scholars, spectators, actors,
The Book of Grace, directed by Robyn Quick, Playwright and Director Center, Moscow 2011
directors, and journalists jockeyed for seats in the two halls where readings took place. Virtually all were more than mere readings, but were actually minimalist productions, replete with costumes, props, blocking, and lighting.

In St. Petersburg we had the ideal opportunity to examine the difference between scholarly and practical approaches to theatre. Some academics were distrustful of the criteria for selection and dismissive of the project’s adaptation aspect, believing that the texts needed to be translated “more faithfully.” Some scholars were concerned that, instead of translating word-for-word, adaptors supplied cultural equivalents for such American manifestations as little-league baseball parks or that they employed slang words which some of the older commentators perceived as being too contemporary. On the other hand, St. Petersburg’s young theatre community embraced the texts with almost voracious enthusiasm. When I departed St. Petersburg, I traveled with the news that three of the plays were being added to the repertory at ON.TEATR. These included *Big Love*, directed by Georgy Tsnobiladze; *The Book of Grace*, directed by Denis Shibaev; and *End Days*, directed by Ricardo Marin, a United-States-born Mexican now based in Russia. Subsequently it was decided to add still another to the theatre’s repertory: *The Aliens*, directed by Maria Kritskaya.

A reading of *Anna in the Tropics* was staged at the Tomsk Drama Theatre in December and, as I write at the end of February 2012, staged readings are being prepared of *End Days* and *The Book of Grace* at the Vologda Young Actors Theatre. More such events are planned in other cities. It will take a few years to see just how much of an impact this program will have. But I can’t help but be encouraged by the fact that, just four months after the first public presentation, we have six productions in line at theatres in three cities. O’Neill, Williams, and Albee are already moving over to make room for Baker, Mee, Parks, Laufer, Cruz, and Rapp in Russia.

*In memory of Daniel Gerould, who was a constant presence for me throughout the twenty-four years of my collaboration with this publication.*
NOTES


3. For one of the hundreds of reports of this well-known event, you may see Michelle Keleman, “Clinton Says She’ll Hit ‘Reset Button’ With Russia” on the site of National Public Radio, posted Marc 6, 2009: http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=101532912.

4. To follow the process in more detail go to a page on my website that chronicles the project's development and provides links to informative articles and videos: http://johnfreedman.webs.com/americanplaysproject.htm

5. It is worth noting that *Talk Radio* was originally written in 1987 and thus, technically, fell out of our self-imposed time range. However, the American partners, noting that the play was reworked for a Broadway run in 2006, felt strongly that its topic could strike a chord in Russia. We agreed that even the best rules are best violated when necessary, and included it.

6. Quick produced a Russian-language website of dramaturgical materials for *The Book of Grace*: https://sites.google.com/site/russianbookofgrace/