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Theatre Journal, Volume 62, Number 3, October 2010, pp. 389-420 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

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John Freedman

Beginnings

Russia in the twenty-first century continues in many ways to support Winston Churchill’s famous characterization of the country as a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. After a period of comparative irrelevance on the world stage in the 1990s, it has emerged again as a major player in international politics. Its leadership and influence is felt in virtually every key issue facing the global community. It is a nation whose leaders now speak the language of “democracy and freedom” as skillfully as any. This all happened, in fact, as Russian authorities closed independent news outlets, looked the other way when “dissenting” journalists and politicians were murdered, provided tacit support to nationalist thugs, and found ways to jail or silence business leaders and social activists who dared to disagree with government policy. In other words, will the real Russia please stand up?

The fact of the matter is that one generation of Russians—or more precisely, a group of playwrights from that generation—has already stepped forward to have its say. Many of these individuals were teenagers or pre-teens when Mikhail Gorbachev sought to reform the Communist Party, and they entered their twenties while Boris El’tsin led Russia through awkward battles with poverty, corruption, and infrastructural collapse. They attained personal and professional maturity in their thirties as Vladimir Putin established social stability and presided over the onset of affluence and a contingent spiritual stagnation. These writers continue to write their plays as Dmitrii Medvedev leads Russia through a global financial crisis, attempts to “push the reset button” in relations with the United States, and struggles with a host of hidden dilemmas left over from all previous eras put together.

Thanks to these playwrights, it is now a commonplace to consider contemporary Russian drama one of the strongest and most lively national movements in the world. The Royal Court Theatre in London, whose proactive international program helped to fuel the boom of new Russian plays with a series of seminars, workshops, and grants in Moscow and London near the turn of the century, catapulted such writers as Vasilii

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Sigarev and the Presniakov brothers to fame. British festivals and seasons of Russian drama organized by the Royal Court, the Royal Shakespeare Company, BBC Radio, and the Sputnik Theatre expanded the list of well-known writers to include Maksym Kurochkin, Iurii Klavdiev, Ol’ga Mukhina, the Durnenkov brothers Viacheslav and Mikhail, Ivan Vyr’ypaev, and others. In the United States, productions of plays by Sigarev, the Presniakovs, and Oleg Bogaev were mounted in New York, Washington, D.C., and Chicago. Professional and academic programs ranging from one day or one week to several years brought Russian drama to the United States at the Lark Theatre and the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center in New York, the Iowa Writers Workshop, the Humana Festival of New American Plays in Louisville, the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center, Princeton University through the CEC Arts Link Open World Cultural Leaders program, and Towson University, where a season of Russian drama featuring ten plays by six authors ran during the 2009–10 season with the aid of Philip Arnoult’s Center for International Theatre Development.

Modern-day writing for the Russian theatre has its origins in the first half of the 1990s. At that time, most of the major writers of the previous era—Liudmila Petrushevskaya, Nina Sadur, Liudmila Razumovskaya, and Mikhail Roshchin, to name just a few—either wrote less, stopped writing altogether, or were produced significantly less often than they had been during the 1980s. As a result, the opinion arose among most observers and theatre practitioners that no one was writing new plays, or even that there were no new playwrights at all. In fact, though, a majority of the writers discussed in the following pages were already creating new works, even as received wisdom denied their existence.

Numerous names and dates may be pinpointed as starting points for what one East European commentator recently called “the spectacular comeback of Russian drama and theatre to the first league of European theatre”1 in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The contenders for bragging rights as “mother” or “father” of the movement are plentiful:

- Nikolai Koliada, whose plays were among the rare contemporary works staged regularly in the late 1980s and early ’90s and who in 1992 convened an informal group of fledgling dramatists that a year later would officially become the first class in Koliada’s now-famed playwriting school at the Ekaterinburg State Theatre Institute.

- Aleksei Kazantsev, who emerged from Aleksei Arbuzov’s studio with several hit plays in the 1970s, took an active role in founding the Liubimovka new-play festival in the early 1990s, and in 1992 began publishing Playwright (Dramaturg), a highly influential miscellany of contemporary drama.

- Elena Gremina, who, when virtually no major theatres were producing contemporary work, managed to get her play Behind the Mirror (Za zerkalom) staged at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1994, starring international opera-diva Galina Vishnevskaya as Catherine the Great.

- Nadezhda Ptushkina, a virtually unknown playwright who left stacks of trenchant melodramas at stage door entrances all over Moscow and suddenly, beginning with By the Light of Others’ Candles (Pri chuzhiikh svechakh) at the Stanislavskii Theatre in 1995, became the hottest writer in town.

- Ol’ga Mukhina, whose play Tania-Tania, produced in January 1996 at the Fomenko Studio, did what others had not in recent memory—drew lavish praise from critics, theatre insiders, and audiences (figs. 1–2).

Figure 1. Andrei Prikhodko and Ksenia Kutepova in Pyotr Fomenko’s production of Ol’ga Mukhina’s *Tania-Tania* at the Fomenko Studio (1996). (Photo: Mikhail Guterman.)

Figure 2. A scene from Mira Stunkel-Kingsley’s production of Ol’ga Mukhina’s *Tania-Tania* at the California Institute of the Arts (2005). (Photo from the archive of John Freedman.)
A few breezy summer afternoons in 1997 in the Moscow suburbs mark the moment when all of these players came together in some fashion, when history actually took a turn, when contemporary Russian drama came alive not just as an art form practiced by isolated individuals, but as a trend that united (or alienated) those individuals. This was the latest installment of the Liubimovka festival, two weeks during which writers, actors, and directors gathered at Konstantin Stanislavskii’s former country estate to rehearse and read dozens of plays by unknown writers. The centerpiece was to be Ol’ga Mukhina’s new play YoU (Iu). Following the unprecedented success of Tania-Tania, YoU was easily the most highly anticipated play to appear in many years. But here is where fate—and years of hard work and preparation by untold numbers of people—intervened to recast the significance of the event.

Two days before the reading of YoU, the popular Moscow Art Theatre actor Vladimir Kashpur stood up in Stanislavskii’s former summer veranda to deliver the text of Oleg Bogaev’s The Russian National Postal Service (Russkaia narodnaia pochta), a play about an old man who, forgotten by God, government, and friends, slowly slips into senility as he appeals to cosmonauts in space, berates the British queen, challenges Vladimir Lenin, and converses with cockroaches. The result was a minor sensation. The packed audience split into factions: a vocal minority branded the play a travesty of Gogolian traditions and a slap in the face of public Russian taste, while a larger group dubbed the play a masterpiece and compared Bogaev favorably to Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett.

This emphasized the unequivocal success of YoU, when, two days later, it was given a delicate and funny reading by students from the fashionable Fomenko Studio. A few dissenters complained that Mukhina was excessively obtuse and too involved in her own personal, poetic style. Nevertheless, the reception was triumphant. There was a sense that the queen of the ball, Mukhina, could now officially be crowned because there was a king, Bogaev, worthy of standing beside her (fig. 3).

The Russian National Postal Service immediately became involved in a tug-of-war among Moscow theatres wanting its first production rights. Fifteen months later, it opened at the Tabakov Theatre under the title of Room of Laughter (Komnata smekha), starring Oleg Tabakov himself under the direction of Kama Ginkas (figs. 4–5). YoU took longer making it to the professional stage, appearing first as a student venture mounted by Evgenii Kamenkovich for the Fomenko Studio. But in 2001, Kamenkovich revived the play at the Moscow Art Theatre, making it the first contemporary play of note to grace that stage since Gremina’s Behind the Mirror seven years earlier (fig. 6).

The summer of 1997 at Liubimovka did more than highlight two playwrights, however; it also united people, styles, and geographical locations. Kazantsev was there as an organizer and motivator. He had published Tania-Tania in his journal Playwright and was enthusiastic about YoU, declaring during the discussion following the reading that Mukhina was teaching him how to write plays all over again. There in spirit was Koliada, for Bogaev was the first pupil to emerge from the Koliada school. Also there as active participants, organizers, and spokespeople were Gremina and Mikhail Ugarov, a husband-and-wife team of playwrights blest with irrepressible energy, a fount of innovative ideas, and a shrewd sense of public relations.

There is also information concealed behind the names of those who were not part of this event. Ptushkina, for instance, was generally considered too commercial and traditional to be part of the nascent community of new Russian dramatists. Other
Figure 3. Oleg Bogaev and Ol’ga Mukhina at the Liubimovka festival in the summer of 1997. (Photo from the archive of John Freedman.)

Figure 4. Oleg Tabakov in Kama Ginkas’s production of Room of Laughter, a production of Oleg Bogaev’s The Russian National Postal Service, at the Tabakov Theater (1998). (Photo: Mikhail Guterman.)
Figure 5. Floyd King in Paul Mullins’s production of Oleg Bogaev’s *The Russian National Postal Service* at the Studio Theatre in Washington, D.C. (2004). (Photo from the archive of John Freedman.)

Figure 6. Darya Moroz and Stanislav Lyubshin in Evgenii Kamenkovich’s production of Ol’ga Mukhina’s *YoU* at the Moscow Art Theater (2001). (Photo: Mikhail Guterman.)
writers were not interested in collective activity or being part of cliques, which is how some detractors viewed the burgeoning movement. What this means is that the proper chemistry for a full-fledged trend was now in place, with actions and reactions, affinities and animosities all coming into play.

The Liubimovka 1997 festival was a catalyzing event, one capable of triggering more such events: the festival attracted many while alienating others. Although it is not a stand-alone turning point, in retrospect it provides a legitimate break separating what came “before” from what came “after.” From this point on, Russia’s theatre community could no longer look at developments in the field of drama as a random string of disparate and isolated incidents; subsequently, each individual development had to be understood within the context of a greater whole. This “whole” was not homogeneous, but it was undeniably a movement. In what follows, I sketch the movement geographically, topically, and stylistically. Although readers might anticipate Moscow as the movement’s geographical center, I argue for the greater importance of two flourishing provincial cities.

**Ekaterinburg**

“There are numerous important playwrights who have had an appreciable impact on Russian drama in the last two decades,” Oleg Bogaev told me one cold December afternoon in 2005. “But Koliada stands alone.” Indeed, Nikolai Koliada invariably comes up at the start of any serious conversation about contemporary Russian drama. A former actor and an accomplished director working at his own Koliada Theatre in Ekaterinburg, he remains a prolific playwright and a tireless educator. He began writing plays in the mid-1980s, and by 2010 his individual works totaled nearly a hundred. In the early 1990s, he was produced in Moscow at several major venues: the Sovremennik, the Malaia Bronnaia Theatre, the Mossovet Theatre, and the Roman Viktiuk Theatre (fig. 7). In 1996, a half-dozen of his plays were in repertory in Moscow, which even now would be impressive, but at the time was unprecedented.

Koliada was one of those accused by detractors of writing *chernukha*—that is, in the common understanding, gloomy plays featuring foul-mouthed characters involved in vile activities. *Chernukha* was something like the Perestroika version of Britain’s “Angry Young Men” or “in-yer-face” drama. Koliada is fascinated by the underside of society: as a director he cultivates the aesthetics of chaos—harsh and clashing visual elements—and dirt in all its real and metaphorical manifestations; as an author of formally traditional dramas, he is drawn to the complexities of shysters, losers, thieves, and the occasional cultured individual trapped in a world run by thugs.

Koliada’s plays helped push back taboos. His characters were among the first in Russia to use obscenities. It is amusing now, when writers routinely create plays where virtually no sentence is constructed without the punctuating aid of an obscenity, to go back to Koliada’s early works and pick out the half-dozen or so offending lexical items. At the time, this was shocking and, to many, inexcusable; it was proof that he was unworthy of serious attention. Even more troubling was the fact that Koliada’s plays occasionally appeared to embrace a casual attitude toward alternative sexualities.

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The elements picked-up by his critics were often quite timid. For example, consider this exchange from a play written in 1993:

**TANIA:** . . . Do you have a girlfriend?

**DIMA:** No.

**TANIA:** Do you go to women?

**DIMA:** No.

**TANIA:** To men?

**DIMA:** No.

**TANIA:** How come?

**DIMA:** Because.

**TANIA:** Why? Nobody? You’re thirty years old. You’ve got to sleep with somebody.

**DIMA:** Why?

**TANIA:** For no reason. Everybody does.

**DIMA:** For no reason I can sleep alone.
Tania: A person has to sleep with someone.

Dima: If a person does, then so be it. I’m not a person, I guess.

Nondeclarations like this from *The Oginski Polonnaise* (*Polonez Oginskogo*) acquired a sense of urgency in the productions of Roman Viktiuk, the first openly gay theatre artist in Russia since the poet, playwright, and composer Mikhail Kuzmin, who spent the early decades of the twentieth century outside of the closet. Viktiuk’s production of Koliada’s *Slingshot* (*Rogatka*), for instance, presented the tale of a male nurse caring for a wounded Afghan war veteran as a gay romance (fig. 8).

Although this is not the place for a detailed discussion of attitudes toward gay culture in Russia, a few points must be made. Because it was illegal during the Soviet era, homosexuality did not exist as a topic for artistic expression throughout the seven decades of Soviet rule. Not surprisingly, the social conservatism of that time did not simply disappear when the tectonic political shifts made social change possible in Russia in the late 1980s; elements of gay experience began appearing in all cultural venues at that time, including theatre, but they long retained their shock value. Gasps or nervous laughter continued, on occasion, to greet openly gay scenes in theatre well into the twenty-first century.

Be that as it may, Koliada’s primary contribution as a writer was that he developed a poetics of the scorned and down-and-out, striking a blow against the entrenched belief that drama must be “literature,” and that literature was invariably inspirational. Koliada’s characters did not speak like people in books; they rarely sought spiritual growth or social equality; they might experience revelations, but if so, it was usually accidental and against their will. Koliada’s characters, in other words, were contemporary people, not idealized or dramatic figures whose purpose was to foster good. For audiences, critics, directors, and actors brought up on Vershinin’s shining hope for the world in another 200 or 300 years—and who had forgotten about the bitter irony Chekhov invested in those lines—Koliada’s characters were often perceived as abominations, which only enhanced his influence. The primary goal of the playwrights who made up the so-called new drama movement during the 2000s was to bring true contemporary speech and behavior to the Russian stage, which Koliada had been doing for over a decade.

Koliada’s authenticity is a key reason why he became an important enabler for others seeking to develop their own voices. So powerful was his aura as a molder of talent that when the then-unknown Presniakov brothers wanted to make their mark, they asked Koliada if they could claim him as their teacher. He was the first to publish them in his capacity as an editor at *Ural*, a literary magazine, and so he reportedly agreed. Only later when they became famous in their own right did the Presniakov brothers publicly disavow the connection, insinuating that Koliada was a hick, while they were “intellectuals.”

The Presniakovs, Oleg and Vladimir, broke out with their play *Playing the Victim* (*Izobrazhaia zhertvu*), a clever and suggestive piece that looked at hip, modern Russia

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in the light of past traditions, both in terms of world literature and Russian history. The play originally appeared in 2003 in a production by Richard Wilson at the Edinburgh festival, and shortly thereafter Viacheslav Kokorin mounted it at the Young Spectator Theatre in Ekaterinburg. Kokorin seated the spectators onstage and had his actors perform the episodic narrative as they stumbled over seats, scurried up and down aisles, and disappeared through exits on balconies. A landmark production by Kirill Serebrennikov at the Moscow Art Theatre in 2004 was radically different, bringing glitz and brash, television-style slickness to the piece. Serebrennikov revisited the work in 2006 with his film based closely on his theatrical version. This was the first major film based on one of the new drama plays, winning grand prizes in 2006 at both the Kinotavr and Rome film festivals, and it reaffirmed the Presniakovs’ place as the hottest playwrights of that era.

Playing the Victim (which exists in two versions and is also known in English as Playing Dead) bears echoes of the Hamlet myth. Both versions tell the story of Valia, an alienated man of thirty, who cannot find his place in the modern world. Suggesting that his purpose is to “vaccinate” himself against his fear of death, he takes on a job impersonating murder victims in police reenactments at crime scenes. The play is episodic—one wants to say in an internet kind of way—and provides a shifting backdrop of people and places. Apparently at the suggestion of Serebrennikov, the authors

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Figure 8. Dmitry Bozin and Sergei Makovetsky in Roman Viktiuk’s production of Nikolai Koliada’s Slingshot at the Roman Viktiuk Theatre (1993). (Photo: Mikhail Guterman.)
intensified the Hamlet parallels in their second version. This variant begins and ends with Valia encountering the ghost of his dead father; it ends as he poisons his mother, his Claudius-like stepfather, and his not-so-Ophelia-like girlfriend.

Important as these changes were theatrically and dramaturgically, however, *Playing the Victim* struck a chord with audiences not because of literary references, but because it captured the spirit of a nation that was developing and changing so rapidly that by the mid-2000s, the phrase “post-Soviet Russia” sounded outdated. The Russia of the 2000s seemed to have moved light years beyond the period associated with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union (a result of the Belavezha Accords of 1991). To writers like the Presniakovs, Soviet Russia hardly existed; their cultural references were rich and varied, including Shakespeare, Madison Avenue, the Silver Age of Russian poetry, Russia’s new consumerism, and Western politics as filtered through the sound bites of mass media. As critic Elena Kovalskaia wrote, the Presniakovs “manipulate the clichés of mass consciousness, contemporary phobias and the contemporary language of the street.” More than anyone before them, they introduced the trappings of commercialism, technology, and mass media to the Russian stage. Maksym Kurochkin referred to the internet and Beavis and Butthead in 2000 in his play *Kitchen*, but the Presniakovs created a whole stylistic out of referencing pop-culture phenomena. In *Terrorism* (*Terrorizm*), a work about how human beings are inclined even in their daily life to force their preferences and desires on one another in a “terrorist” manner, characters repeatedly refer to commercial brand names such as Evian, Nescafé, Wispa, and McDonald’s. In *Floor Covering* (*Polovoe pokrytie*), a wild fantasy in which a dead body is buried beneath the floor, one of the characters works as a merchandiser for Coca-Cola and is charged with ensuring that bottles of Fanta, Bonaqua, and Coke—all mentioned by name of course—are properly displayed on store shelves. This was both a superficial and deep-seated sign that the gray days of “Soviet reality” were gone.

The Presniakovs, both of whom began their careers as professors at Ural State University, created a territory where the fragmented, confusing, and often trivial contemporary world runs up against the certainties and substance that, rightly or not, we tend to equate with the past. This was exemplified in *Captive Spirits* (*Plennye dukhi*), staged by Vladimir Ageev at Moscow’s Playwright and Director Center in 2003. Using the same episodic, ironic, and slightly grotesque approach, *Captive Spirits* turned the tables on the brothers’ other plays; rather than exploring contemporary worlds containing fragmented remnants of the past, it portrayed complex relationships among three great historical figures in their own time: the poet Aleksandr Blok; the poet and novelist Andrei Bely; and Dmitrii Mendeleev, the chemist and creator of the periodic table. The Presniakovs’ conclusion was that these “great men,” whom we know through “great works” and sullen, imposing portraits and granite statues erected in their memory, were as petty, bewildered, silly, and alive as anyone in the present era.

Emerging two years before the Presniakovs was Vasilii Sigarev, a writer very much in the vein of his teacher Koliada. Sigarev’s *Plasticine* (*Plastilin*), directed by Serebrennikov at the Playwright and Director Center in 2001, had genuine shock value when it appeared. Its story of violence, drugs, alcohol, and aimlessness in a teenager’s life pulled back the curtain on reality as no other play had. Sigarev’s language was forceful.

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and direct; his characters—the vulnerable teenage boy, his oblivious grandmother, his monstrous teacher, the evil thugs who rape him—were straight out of a world that most Russians recognized but had not seen portrayed in such detail. All of this caused one British reviewer of a production mounted at the Royal Court Theatre to suggest that “it would appear that modern Russia is a country populated by drunkards, pimps and bullies where food is in short supply.” Superficial as the observation may be, it is worth pointing out that detractors in Russia, many of whom saw Plasticine as a play about monsters, recoiled from it for much the same reason. The question, of course, is this: Do you blame the mirror itself or the person holding it for the images it reflects?

Sigarev’s plays Phantom Pains (Fantomnye boli), in which a cultured young man crassly uses a grief-stricken widow for sexual satisfaction until his conscience awakens, and Black Milk (Chernoe moloko), about an uncouth young couple selling junk merchandise to unwitting country bumpkins, trawled territory similar to that of Plasticine. All three were written at approximately the same time (namely, between 1999 and 2001) and concerned young people struggling to make their ways in a corrupt, violent, and uncaring world. These plays appeared as the term “new drama” was coming into vogue in Russia.

Sigarev, in fact, was one of the most important figures in forwarding the new drama. But for every Serebrennikov, who had a feel for the harsh-reality plays coming out in the early 2000s, dozens of directors settled for creating artistically bankrupt productions that merely exploited the trappings of controversy. Following the enormous success of Plasticine, I saw short-lived, misguided productions of Black Milk and a comedy called Lie Detector (Detektor Izhi) in Moscow that had the dubious distinction of raising questions about Sigarev’s overall value as a writer. It was only when Irina Keruchenko produced a powerfully understated rendition of Phantom Pains at Teatr.doc in Moscow in 2004, and when Sigarev himself staged a slashing version of Black Milk at the Ekaterinburg Puppet Theatre in 2005, that the reality of his stage worthiness began matching the praise that had accumulated around his work. Sigarev’s brash, uncouth production of Black Milk demonstrated the fearlessness of his drama as no other director had, Serebrennikov included. The violent relationship between the confused young man and woman was expressed beautifully and shockingly in their constant spitting matches—encounters that were as sexual and affective as they were hostile and degrading.

Sigarev achieved new heights in 2009 when film festivals throughout Russia and Europe featured Wolfy (Volchek), his film debut as both director and screenwriter; the film won Best Film or Grand Prize nods at the Zurich, Sochi Open, and Kiev’s Molodist festivals.

The status of Koliada’s playwriting school was again confirmed following the emergence of Iaroslava Pulinovich in 2008. Koliada began publishing Pulinovich’s dramas in Ural in 2007, when the author was still a teenager. By 2009, she had won several playwriting contests and had written a play, Beyond the Track (Za liniei), on commission from the Royal Shakespeare Company in London. Her monologue Natasha’s Dream (Natashina mecha), which explored the difficult life of a teenager in a provincial orphanage, debuted in 2009 in Moscow at the Playwright and Director Center in a production by Georg Genoux (fig. 9).

Pulinovich, according to Russian critic Pavel Rudnev, “fearlessly looks the world in the eyes and accepts its best and worst aspects with joy and enthusiasm.” Arguably, the key word here is “fearlessness.” In Natasha’s Dream, as in its companion piece I Won (Pobedila in)—another monologue of a teenage girl, but this one of a successful family’s pampered daughter—Pulinovich keeps her attention focused on the dangers of her heroine’s hopes and dreams. Although living in diametrically opposed worlds, both girls must fend for themselves when confronted with the duplicity and fraud that surround them on all sides. Pulinovich characterized these monologues as “two extremes about how not to bring up young people.”

**Moscow**

The opinion that Moscow is the center of Russian culture is both commonly held and grossly exaggerated. The achievements of Nikolai Koliada alone, to say nothing of his accomplished students, refute this notion. Nevertheless, Moscow is a powerful magnet and effective launching pad for talent and ideas that arise elsewhere. Aleksei Kazantsev, who, along with Koliada, is one of the two most celebrated figures in this golden age of Russian drama (1990s and 2000s), understood Moscow’s cultural position...
as well as anyone. In his journal *Playwright* he published plays by writers of varied geographical backgrounds. After he founded the Playwright and Director Center in Moscow (1998) with fellow playwright Mikhail Roshchin, he always included plays in his repertory that reflected developments throughout the Russian-speaking world. A glance at the works produced at the center between 1998 and 2010 (Kazantsev died in 2007, but the theatre continues his policies) reveals plays by writers from Ekaterinburg, Togliatti, Ufa, St. Petersburg, Minsk (Belarus), and Kiev (Ukraine).

The Playwright and Director Center was arguably the most important theatre of its era. Beginning with its first production, Elena Isaeva’s verse tragedy *Judith* (*Iudif*), it consciously sought to discover new writers, directors, actors, and even audiences. Over the years it has mounted premieres of new plays by Sigarev, the Presniakovs, Oleg Bogaev, Maksym Kurochkin, Mikhail Ugarov, Yury Klavdiev, Mikhail Durnenkov, Pavel Priazhko, Pulinovich, and others. In its early years it benefited from a close relationship with the Royal Court Theatre, which supplied Kazantsev’s fledgling theatre with one key play (Mark Ravenhill’s *Shopping and Fucking*—a *succès de scandale* in 1999) and some fruitful ideas. One of these, the *Moscow, Open City* (*Moskva – otkrytiy gorod*) project, was a 1999 production consisting of over a dozen short plays written under the guidance of Royal Court representatives who came to Moscow to share their expertise in developing new work. But the primary reason for the success of the Playwright and Director Center—an enterprise initially financed out of pocket—was Kazantsev’s single-minded belief that Russian playwrights had something important to contribute to the theatrical process.

Sigarev’s *Plasticine*, produced by the Center in 2001, set off a chain reaction that altered contemporary Russian theatre. Director Serebrennikov became an overnight celebrity and quickly moved on to such established houses as the Moscow Art Theatre and the Sovremennik, taking along with him writers and actors he had collaborated with at the Playwright and Director Center. In short, by 2002, artists who had struggled to gain attention in 1997 were moving into the mainstream.

Even before this, Maksym Kurochkin, a soft-spoken iconoclast from Kiev, was a major beneficiary of the influence of the Playwright and Director Center. One of his first produced texts was a five-page miniature called *The Eye* (*Glaz*)—a component of *Moscow, Open City*. This strange, funny account of contemporary Moscow corrupting an invading Hun was one of the most interesting pieces in the project (fig. 10). Before long, it found its way into the hands of Russia’s top matinee idol, Oleg Menshikov, who by chance was seeking a playwright for his next high-profile production. The result was the epic and enigmatic *Kitchen* (*Kukhnia*, 2000), now one of the iconic plays of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

In *Kitchen*, Kurochkin gave free rein to his prodigious imaginative powers, combining characters from the Middle-High-German Nibelung saga with contemporary Russians employed in an incongruous medieval-style castle built in a forest. The convoluted story follows a group of people who are challenged by fate and their employer, Gunther, to recall their forgotten past. Modern-day cooks, pot-washers, a bodyguard, and a kitchen maid slowly recognize that they once were witnesses to, or participants in, events that led to the murder of Siegfried by Gunther during a hunting trip “twenty years ago,” as Kurochkin puts it. Until this incident is resolved, Gunther cannot rest easy. But once the old rivalries, sins, and offences are dredged up, chaos and threats
of new violence ensue. The problem—a supremely contemporary one—is irresolvable. These people cannot properly advance into the future until they reconcile themselves with their past, but as soon as they recall events of the past, they are moved to seek revenge (fig. 11).

Kitchen is an enormous repository of historical, cultural, and literary references. It encapsulates the lies, dangers, and ethical traps of twenty-first-century civilization in glitzy, ironic, even sarcastic form, careening from scene to scene with appearances by Beavis and Butthead running up against veiled though obvious references to Peter the Great, a man who attempted to create a civilized city ex nihilo in a bog. One character swears by the internet, and another reads a fashionable glossy magazine while an army of attacking Huns prepares to storm the castle walls. Some characters speak in Shakespearean-style verse; others struggle to express themselves with a few simple nouns and verbs. Attila the Hun addresses the Russian kitchen maid, who has remembered that she is Queen Kriemhild, widow of Siegfried: “So, wife, what shall we do? There are two essential choices—to avenge or not to avenge.”

Kurochkin is a chameleon of a writer: each of his new plays is unlike the previous one in style and execution. His rough-handed treatment of time and space, and his luxurious exploration of the possibilities of language, however, remains constant. Imago, directed by Nina Chusova for the Face Fashion agency in 2002, is a wild phantasmagoria of Shaw’s Pygmalion. In this play, which mocked the notion of fashion, Eliza Doolittle was the one handing out lessons all round. Vodka, Fucking, and Television (Vodka, eblia,

Figure 10. Alexander Usov and Vladimir Skvortsov in Maksym Kurochkin’s The Eye, a component of the Moscow, Open City project at the Playwright and Director Center (1999). (Photo: Mikhail Guterman.)
televizor), staged by Iurii Urnov at Teatr.doc in 2006, is an intimate, acerbic piece about a writer who, having has lost touch with his muse, summons his three most corrosive vices to inform them that one of them must go if he is to survive (fig. 12). Repress and Excite (Podavliat’ i vozbuždat’), directed by Aleksandr Kaliagin at the Et Cetera Theatre in 2006, is a parody of a boulevard melodrama that deals with such disparate topics as the stranglehold of Chekhov and Stanislavskii on Russian theatre, the lies of history, and the corruption and shallow desires of modern society (fig. 13). In most of his works, Kurochkin breaches the limits of the Russian experience by reimagining Russian culture in the light of a shared, international set of symbols and values.

The year 2002 marked a further advance in the development of contemporary Russian drama with the founding of both Teatr.doc—another venue devoted to new writing—and the New Drama Festival. Both parallel to and interconnected with these developments were the Moscow debuts of the Presniakovs and Ivan Vyrypaev, as well as the directing debut of Mikhail Ugarov (of his own dramatization of Ivan Goncharov’s novel Oblomov, under the title Oblom Off, at the Playwright and Director Center). Much of this activity came about as a result of the growing influence of the

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Figure 12. A scene from Stephen Nunn’s production of Maksym Kurochkin’s *Vodka, Fucking, and Television* for the Towson University Department of Theater Arts (2009). (Photo courtesy of Towson University.)

Figure 13. A scene from Aleksandr Kaliagin’s production of Maksym Kurochkin’s *Repress and Excite* at the Et Cetera Theatre (2006). (Photo by Zurab Mtskhvetaridze.)
Ugarov and Elena Gremina created Teatr.doc in order to develop new work in the technique of verbatim or documentary drama. This method, brought to Russia by the Royal Court, easily established roots in its new environment. Writers talked to homeless people, alcoholics, thieves, murderers, coal miners, and mothers in maternity wards, then reshaped these conversations into performance texts. Collaborating with small theatres such as one called Women in Chelyabinsk and another called Loge in Kemerovo, Teatr.doc echoed Kazantsev’s policy at the Playwright and Director Center by looking to the hinterlands for inspiration. If most of its early productions lacked artistic sophistication, it quickly accomplished something more important: welcoming to its small stage the experiences of ordinary Russian people speaking colloquially, which superficially meant that obscenities cropped up in most texts, grabbing much attention and encouraging vocal opposition. But this was not a marker of the real change being fostered by Teatr.doc. Truly novel were the characters, stories, and themes that Russian theatre had rarely—if ever—contemplated; Teatr.doc stood firmly in opposition to literature, poetry, and traditional production values. A typical performance at “Doc,” as everyone called it, consisted of actors in street clothes indifferently mumbling their lines on an empty stage. Many of its productions looked suspiciously like television reality shows, which was no coincidence: two of its frequent collaborators, directors Aleksandr Vartanov and Ruslan Malikov, had “day jobs” directing a popular reality talk-show called Windows (Okna). In any case, Teatr.doc proudly proclaimed itself as a “theatre where no one acts,” the mantra here being reality, veracity, and authenticity—or at least these artists’ perception of them.

A curious though substantive aside to the story of Teatr.doc is the fact that both Gremina and Ugarov, who made their reputations writing highly literate plays and commercially successful screenplays for television serials, now found themselves in the position of being godparents to a movement that rejected literate and commercial concerns. Both essentially stopped writing plays, instead devoting their talents to the service of helping others develop theirs. Gremina continued to write for television, pouring much of her earnings into Teatr.doc; Ugarov reinvented himself as a director and worked hard to break down the boundaries between commercial and independent theatre. Ugarov directed new drama not only at his own theatre, but also at commercial houses such as Et Cetera and the Moscow Art Theatre, as well as at the small Praktika Theatre.

While strictly avoiding traditional dramatic forms, Gremina and Ugarov did team up to create two documentary texts that indicated just how far from the mainstream they were willing to go. Almost exactly a year following the 2004 terrorist attack on an elementary school in Beslan, they put together a series of monologues and dialogues, titled September.doc (Sentiaabr’.doc), about the aftermath of the incident. The monologues were drawn from incendiary, strange, and occasionally insightful commentaries originally published on web sites and in forums, chat rooms, and blogs. Although the documentary’s production had a short run, it remains the only serious response to the tragedy that appeared in Russian theatres. Then, in May 2010, Gremina and Ugarov

14 Several early texts created at Teatr.doc are available in Dokumental’nyi teatr. P’esy (Moscow: Tri Kvadrata, 2004).
again made a blatant political statement in *One Hour Eighteen* (*Chas vosemnadtsat’*), their brief but hard-hitting account of the mysterious death in prison in December 2009 of Sergei Magnitskii, a muckraking attorney who was arrested and held without trial for nearly a year on charges of graft and corruption. The play consisted of ten monologues by nine characters that were drawn entirely from interviews in the press. The characters included the victim’s mother; the judge who refused to let the defendant have a cup of hot water because “it wasn’t his job”; and the doctor who, rather than sending the defendant to a hospital because of an acute case of pancreatitis, turned him over to prison guards who handcuffed and confined him in isolation. *One Hour Eighteen*, which was the exact amount of time that Magnitskii was left unattended to die in his cell, is an extremely rare case of the Russian artistic community speaking about contemporary political issues in their work.

Despite Teatr.doc’s reputation as a haven for reality-based works, its first and biggest success was a poetic play by a young man who used the form of the dialogue to explore the inner thoughts of a single, troubled character. Ivan Vyrypaev’s *Oxygen* (*Kislorod*), directed by Viktor Ryzhakov in 2002, was structured like a musical album, consisting of ten “compositions” broken into verses and refrains. Its story of adultery and murder was based loosely on themes and linguistic structures found in the Ten Commandments. Sasha Dugdale, who translated the play for the Royal Court, described it as an expression of the “emotional impasse of the new Russian youth,” and suggested that it “examines the fears and frustrations of a people who are at once quite distanced from the world stage yet also at the very heart of it.”

The enigmatic *Oxygen* met with critical acclaim and commercial success, and Vyrypaev, who was born and raised in Irkustsk, Siberia, followed it with more plays that experimented with monologues and dialogues as he explored the moral terrain of contemporary Russia. *Genesis-2* (*Bytie-2*), directed by Ryzhakov as a joint project of Teatr.doc and the New Drama Festival in 2004, is a strange work that again was inspired by the Bible. Perhaps toying with Teatr.doc’s earnestly proclaimed policy of working with documentary texts, Vyrypaev declared that the play was compiled from letters written by a schizophrenic woman, though in fact its central figure is a literary conceit based on the character of Lot’s wife, who turned to salt after making the mistake of looking back to see the destruction of the city of Sodom that she was abandoning. *Genesis-2* is the confession of a sensitive, thinking person who has rejected society and removed herself from it.

Vyrypaev’s fascination with moral degradation received its most trenchant treatment in *July (iul’)*, which is a monologue of an aging mass-murderer. Ryzhakov directed it in 2006 at the Praktika Theatre, another new venue promoting new writing that opened in Moscow under the direction of Eduard Boiakov in 2005. Vyrypaev has continued writing for the theatre, although his biggest impact in recent years has been in cinema: his film *Euphoria* (*Efioria*, 2006) won numerous awards, as did his own experimental adaptation of *Oxygen* (2009).

Other notable successes at Teatr.doc also strayed from the strict tenets of documentary drama. Elena Isaeva’s *Doc.tor* (*Dok.tor*, 2005), the account of a physician’s journey from

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hope to despair caused by the conditions in which he works, was based on interviews conducted with a doctor who worked for years in Russian provincial hospitals. This, however, was anything but a typical straightforward, text-based production. Director Vladimir Pankov, known for his self-proclaimed style of musical theatre called “sound-drama,” dressed the production up fancifully with songs and dances that worked well in this quirky play for the very reason that they were so incongruous in the context. Two plays by the Minsk-based Ivan Priazhko, produced jointly with the Playwright and Director Center, were every bit as gritty as a verbatim text, but were unmistakably the product of a writer doing more than just recording and organizing facts drawn from life. His Panties (Trusy), directed by Elena Nevezhina in 2007, was a burlesque of Greek tragedy. In it, a young woman willingly risks her life to discover the truth about the theft of her panties that were drying on a clothesline (fig. 14). Priazhko’s other play Life Is Grand (Zhizn’ prekrasna), directed by Ugarov and Marat Gatsalov in 2009, is an obscenity-laced, alcohol-fueled piece about two teenage women and the slightly older men who hover around them, falling in and out of love and lust with them. The piece is almost nihilistic in its utter rejection of nearly everything one usually equates with morality and propriety. Paradoxically, however, what sets it apart is its often tender, even forgiving portraits of people who sense that their lives are going nowhere, but don’t know what to do about it (fig. 15).

Teatr.doc was a key partner in the founding of the New Drama Festival. Originally, it was an enterprise uniting the Golden Mask Festival, Teatr.doc, and the Moscow Art Theatre, though the latter organization quickly fell by the wayside. Gremina, Ugarov, Eduard Boiakov (then Golden Mask’s general director), and Sasha Dugdale of the British Council conceived the festival as a high-profile, media-friendly showcase for new dramatic writing. Over the course of its stormy existence—it ran from 2002 to 2008—the festival grew from a modest, seminar-type enterprise into a major international event before collapsing under the weight of differences in vision behind the scenes.16 The term “new drama,” which by 2002 applied to almost any new play challenging the theatrical establishment by way of language, form, or content, was codified here.

To its advantage, the New Drama Festival made the concept of new drama a highly contentious topic. By establishing new drama as a brand name and by becoming arbiters of what should be considered acceptable in the world of contemporary drama, the festival organizers alienated many, including potential friends and patrons, while energizing a loyal fan base. Embracing the notion that there is “no such thing as bad publicity,” the festival organizers skillfully manipulated prevailing controversies—controversies that they often purposefully provoked.

Although he was considered an honorary member of the New Drama club, Koliada was often scornful of the festival’s methods, and Bogaev flatly stated: “We have a notion these days called ‘new drama.’ The language generally used there is not mine. It’s a naïve kind of art that exists outside the Russian tradition.”17 When, in 2005, the festival chose not to include Ol’ga Mukhina’s Flying (Letit) in its program, it again became evident that the organization was committed more to a relatively narrow agenda of promoting what we might call “gritty realism” than to a program that could embrace

16 Boiakov revived the New Drama Festival under the name Tekstura, or Texture, in the city of Perm in 2009. Elena Gremina established the New Play Festival in Moscow in 2010.
Figure 14. Arina Marakulina in Elena Nevezhina’s production of Ivan Priazhko's *Panties*, a joint production of Teatr.doc and the Playwright and Director Center (2007). (Photo courtesy of the Playwright and Director Center.)

Figure 15. A scene from Ivan Priazhko’s *Life Is Grand*, a joint production of Teatr.doc and the Playwright and Director Center (2009). (Photo courtesy of the Playwright and Director Center.)
all dramatists. Nonetheless, under no circumstances should the importance of the New Drama Festival be underestimated, particularly because the publicity it generated was instrumental in helping many artists make the transition into mainstream theatre.

The difficulties facing Mukhina’s *Flying*, the writer’s first play in nearly eight years, were indicative of the situation confronting playwrights whose work did not fit easily into the new drama category. Unable to find a director or venue that would stage her play as she envisioned it, Mukhina directed and mounted it independently. Its story of oblivious thirty-somethings with too much money, power, success, and drugs for their own good was the first Russian drama to take on the new, affluent middle-class that arose largely because Putin introduced “order and stability” into Russia’s chaotic social and economic spheres. In one of the scenes in the play a character receives a call informing him that “the President just signed off” on a program he is overseeing.\(^{18}\) The president’s support is offered as proof of ultimate success.

Although *Flying* was another exquisite work in Mukhina’s mellifluous yet challenging style, and although she insisted that she wrote the play verbatim from interviews with friends, the theatre community did not embrace it. Kamenkovich staged a student production at the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts in 2007, but it was mounted again on the professional Russian stage only in 2009 at the Pushkin Drama Theatre of Magnitogorsk (fig. 16). Meanwhile, it had been translated into numerous European languages and staged in several countries. Paradoxically, Mukhina’s reputation as an architect of Russia’s new drama, based on the importance of *Tania-Tania* and *YoU*, began to solidify only after the movement rejected her later plays. Pavel Rudnev suggested in 2004 that “Mukhina should long ago have been entered into the list of pioneers of ‘new drama.’”\(^{19}\) But that happened overtly only in 2008 when *Tania-Tania* was published in an anthology of the seminal texts of the new-drama movement.\(^{20}\) By the following year, a journalist in Magnitogorsk would declare that Mukhina was the “godmother of all the furor” kicked up by the new-drama movement.\(^{21}\)

Evgeny Grishkovets was an enormous cultural phenomenon during the late 1990s and early 2000s. A complete unknown, he exploded on the scene in 1998 with his self-staged, self-acted monologue about a hapless sailor, *How I Ate a Dog* (*Kak ia s’el sobaku*). Proclaiming himself a “new sentimentalist,” he won an enthusiastic following as much for his endearing, goofy persona as for the content of his plays. By 2001, Grishkovets had written six more dramas that enjoyed enormous box office success, *Winter* (*Zima*, 1999), *The Planet* (*Planeta*, 2001), and *The City* (*Gorod*, 2002) among them. All offered slightly sad, heart-warming tales of people who were clumsy and unlucky in love. *The Siege* (*Osada*), a cheery, precious tale of soldiers at war in antiquity, was mounted at the Moscow Art Theatre in 2003. By this time, Grishkovets was a media star, featured in ads for American Express and starring in his own television show. The popularity of his internet blog led to the publication of numerous books, in addition to novels and story collections. His play *The House* (*Dom*), co-authored with Anna Matison and


\(^{20}\) Kristina Matvienko and Elena Kovalskaia, eds., *Novaya Drama* (St. Petersburg: Seans/Amfora, 2008).

staged by Iosif Raikehl’gauz at Moscow’s Contemporary Play School in 2009, tells the compelling tale of a man who wants to purchase a house and move out of his cramped apartment, but runs into insurmountable obstacles every step of the way.

**Togliatti**

Unruly and occasionally winding up on the wrong side of the law, Iurii Klavdiev tried his hand at poetry, journalism, and manual labor during his youth. Even though his grandfather was instrumental in organizing the first theatre in Togliatti, it never occurred to Iurii to write a play. That changed radically in 2002 when Ivan Vyrypaev visited Klavdiev’s hometown with a touring version of the New Drama Festival. Klavdiev described the experience in this way: “I never considered plays to be of any interest. But then I saw a performance of Ivan Vyrypaev’s *Oxygen*. That’s when I realized that drama is probably the most dynamic genre we have today.”

Togliatti is an unlikely location to nurture a boom in contemporary drama. Essentially an “artificial” city built in the 1950s to support the Soviet Union’s largest automobile manufacturing plant, it still has few other reasons to exist in the twenty-first century, even as financial crises and fluctuating oil prices seriously endanger the auto industry. But in 1999, when playwright Vadim Levanov took over a small, annual poetry festival called May Readings, a cultural institution began to evolve in Togliatti. Levanov attracted others interested in theatre, encouraged them to write, and promoted their

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work. Supported by Teatr.doc and the New Drama Festival, he was joined by a pair of siblings, Viacheslav and Mikhail Durnenkov, the latter of whom invited his friend Klavdiev to act in one of his plays. Mikhail needed a fencer for a fight scene and Klavdiev had the appropriate skills. Thus by the early 2000s the elements were in place for what would come to be known as the “Togliatti phenomenon.”

Unlike the Presniakov brothers, who invariably write together, the Durnenkovs work alone as often as they do in tandem. But it was their joint composition The Cultural Layer (Kul’turnyi sloi) that brought them international attention. Produced locally in 2003, revived in St. Petersburg for the 2004 New Drama Festival, and staged by Nikolai Skorik as The Last Day of Summer (Poslednii den’ leta) in 2005 at the Moscow Art Theatre, it was chosen that same year as the title piece for an anthology of plays and interviews exploring the new-drama trend. The play is simultaneously realistic and mystical. The setting is an apartment in an anonymous, grimy city where various individuals have encountered different yet similar problems over the years. It is almost as if the ghosts of these people meet and interact, even if the real people never do. The nondescript apartment is a receptacle for layers of the city’s history and culture that build up over time. “The Durnenkovs are representative of Togliatti’s success,” wrote Yana Ross in 2006. “Their work often balances parables and ballads with simple, poetic language of the everyday.”

The most recent joint work by the brothers is Drunks (P’ianitsy), a play commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2009 for its season of Russian drama. Drunks takes on the social and human impact of two wars in Chechnya, the arcane nature of political culture in Russia, and the backward conditions of life in the Russian provinces. Called by one British observer “one of the funniest—and blackest—pieces of modern drama I’ve seen for a very long time,” it follows a Chechen war veteran as he drinks himself into oblivion while politicians struggle to turn him into a hero who supports their candidacies.

Viacheslav Durnenkov had several of his own plays staged in Moscow, including Three Acts about Four Paintings (Tri akta o chetyrekh kartinakh), directed by Ugarov at the Praktika Theatre in 2006, and Exhibits (Eksponaty, also known in English as Frozen in Time), staged by Aleksei Zhiriakov as a joint production of Teatr.doc and the Playwright and Director Center in 2009. Both explore the disintegration of culture albeit in different ways: in Three Acts, a sensitive, nineteenth-century writer does his best to defend his creative autonomy against the onslaught of friends and society, but succumbs to a numbing heroin habit; while Exhibits, written in the style of a traditional realistic, social-issues drama, depicts the disaster that transpires in a contemporary provincial town when two city slickers suggest turning it into a tourist trap by transforming it into a living museum.

Mikhail Durnenkov’s best play to date is arguably Trash (Khlam), staged by Gatsalov at the Playwright and Director Center in 2008. Mikhail, who moved to Moscow to

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study screenwriting at the State Film Institute, appears to have incorporated experiences from his own life and studies in the piece. The episodic work jumps around in cinematic fashion, observing people who, as we learn, are the characters of a film script that a writer pitches unsuccessfully to an indifferent producer. Nonlinear in its narration, Trash is filled with sharply defined characters whose lives on or over the edge occasionally intersect.

Iurii Klavdiev rose to prominence more quickly than of any of his peers. His Moscow debut occurred in 2006; by 2008, he was recognized as one of the most original playwrights in Russia and had already established himself as one of its most uncompromising screenwriters. Everyone Dies But Me (Vse umrut, a ia ostanus’), a feature film by Valeriia Gai Germanika made on the basis of a script by Klavdiev and Aleksandr Rodionov, attracted both controversy and praise for its harsh representation of youth culture. School (Shkola), a prime-time television series about wayward students and ineffectual teachers at an unenlightened school, was directed by Gai Germanika and scripted by various writers, including Klavdiev, Viacheslav Durnenkov, and the Kiev-based writer Natalia Vorozhbit. It was so controversial that Moscow mayor Iurii Luzhkov, members of the Russian State Duma, and even, reportedly, students at the school where the series was being filmed called for it to be pulled off the air.26

As a playwright, Klavdiev marked out personal territory with a violent, fantastic style, tempered by a perceptible willingness to demonstrate the vulnerable qualities of key characters. He unmistakably draws inspiration from Oriental martial-arts films and old American westerns, but the result is uniquely Russian. His The Bullet Collector (Sobiratel’ pul’), debuting in a minimalist production by Ruslan Malikov at the Praktika Theatre in 2006, told the story of a teenager rebelling against his hated stepfather, failing to connect with his mother and friends, dodging the violence foisted upon him by local thugs, and fantasizing about a sect of hit men to which his birth father may have belonged. Let’s Go, a Car Is Waiting (Poidem, nas zhdet mashina), a freewheeling piece that genealogically hearkens back to the film Thelma and Louise, was given a mystical twist by director Vladimir Ageev in 2006 at the Playwright and Director Center. This play is revealing of Klavdiev’s sensibilities, because it positions two smart, sensitive women at the center of the writer’s usual violently machismo male environment. In this case, two young women who have suffered at the hands of men resolve to avenge themselves, each in her own way: one will kill someone at random, the other will commit suicide. The journey they take together is revelatory for both.

Klavdiev’s play I Am the Machine Gunner (Ia—pulemetchik), given a sizzling staging by Keruchenko at Teatr.doc in 2007, brought the playwright international attention. This powerful work was performed at numerous festivals throughout Europe. Formally challenging, it is a monologue split into two distinct voices: that of a young gang member in contemporary Russia, and that of his beloved grandfather who fought in World War II. With one exception (when, only once, the actor is directed to pass his hand over his face, perhaps as if removing or putting on a mask), Klavdiev never indicates which of the two voices is speaking, although disparate topics and different sensibilities provide ample clues. The result is a hard-hitting drama that merges two generations into one and confronts issues of honor, courage, and commitment.

Two other plays, The Polar Truth (Zapoliarnaia pravda), directed by Genoux at Teatr. doc in 2006, and The Slow Sword (Medlennyi mech), the world premiere of which was staged in English by Noah Birksted-Breen at his Sputnik Theatre in London in 2007, show the broad range of Klavdiev’s talent. Polar Truth is an intimate piece about a close-knit group of youngsters whom society rejects because they are HIV positive. Written on a grant from the British Council, the play is based on material gathered during a fact-finding trip to the northern Russian city of Norilsk. The play is not, however, an average verbatim or documentary play: Klavdiev’s personal stamp—the usual stew of violence, braggadocio, and irony—is on it. The story is particularly effective because the playwright avoids portraying his characters as victims, instead presenting them as pioneers of a new world. The Slow Sword is quintessential Klavdiev—fantastic, violent, and cinematic—both in the sweeping tale it tells and in its choppy leaps from one scene to another. Its main character, a dropout from the worlds of high-tech and high-finance, is a kind of superhero blest with magical powers, possessing the ability to find people in need and to appear at will at scenes of trouble. He is a marauder for justice, although it is doubtful that he can do much good in a fraudulent world overrun with drugs and brutality (figs. 17–18).

Vadim Levanov, the author of some three-dozen plays, enjoyed a modest production history through the first decade of the twenty-first century. His whimsical The Balloon of the Montgolfier Brothers (Shar brat’ev Mongol’f’e), which explores a man seeking to overcome the limits of reality, was staged independently in Moscow in the mid-2000s. Others of his plays were mounted in the Russian cities of Saratov, Khantii-Mansiisk, Ekaterinburg, and Lipetsk. But Levanov made his biggest mark in 2009 when Valerii Fokin staged Kseniia: A Story of Love (Kseniia: Istoriia liubvi) at the Aleksandrinskii Theatre in St. Petersburg. This powerful tale, which takes place in the middle of the eighteenth century, was based on the true story of Ksenii Petrova, a young aristocrat who renounced everything, including her name and sex, and lived a life of poverty and anonymity after her husband died. Rather than relating a historical tale, Levanov created a parable about society’s hostility to people who are different, about the price one pays and the burden one bears for cultivating genuine love in one’s heart.

The World

Few Russian writers have enjoyed the validation that Nikolai Khalezin and his Free Theatre of Minsk, Belarus, received when Tom Stoppard spent a few days there in 2005 watching plays. After joining the group to conduct master classes in playwriting, the British writer famously stated: “I would like my plays to be staged in a theatre like the one I saw in Minsk.”

Khalezin and his wife Natalia Koliada (a journalist by profession—no relation to Nikolai Koliada) founded the Free Theatre in 2005 and almost immediately ran afoul of the authorities. Harassment, even arrests, plagued the theatre from its earliest days. Khalezin insists there is nothing political about the productions he mounts, and indeed, his repertoire most often consisted of introspective contemporary works. The Free Theatre opened with Sarah Kane’s 4.48 Psychosis, followed by Techniques of Breathing

Figure 17. Iurii Klavdiev and Mikhail Durnenkov participating in a public reading of Klavdiev’s *The Slow Sword* in Togliatti (2006). (Photo courtesy of the May Readings Festival.)

Figure 18. Gehane Strehler and Simon Tcherniak in Noah Birksted-Breen’s production of Iurii Klavdiev’s *The Slow Sword* at the Sputnik Theatre, London (2007). (Photo: Luke Tchalenko.)
in an Airlocked Space (Tekhnika dykhaniia v bezvozdushnom prostranstve), a play by Natalia Moshina from the Russian city of Ufa. Like so many other works being produced in Russia at that time, this was an episodic piece detailing quiet, understated despair, although it never lost respect for its characters. In the play, a teenager dies of cancer, economics students concoct a way to make money through a religious cult, and an aging actress contemplates a comeback. Following its 2005 premiere in Minsk, Birksted-Breen staged Techniques in English in 2006 at the Sputnik Theatre, thereby giving Moshina the curious distinction of having been produced in two foreign countries before Russia discovered her (fig. 19). Her play Pulia, written in 2006, marked her debut in Moscow when it was staged in 2009 at the Playwright and Director Center. Pulia is a surreal and introspective piece in which a sensitive young woman named Pulia (in Russian, bullet), relives her entire life in her mind, beginning with her first consciousness in her mother’s womb (fig. 20).

Khalezin attained international celebrity with Generation Jeans (Pokolenie jeans, 2005), a one-man piece he performed himself. Attracting such admiring spectators as Vaclav Havel and Mick Jagger, this freewheeling monologue chronicles the coming-of-age of an entire Soviet-era East European generation in light of the cultural phenomenon of hip clothing. In the former Soviet Bloc, jeans were a symbol of freedom, fashion, rebellion, rock and roll, and sex—in other words, they were the key to the world. Self-deprecating though always mindful of the significance of his character’s experiences, Khalezin’s piece meanders through a folksy history lesson of Belarus that passes between the past of Soviet repression and the present of Aleksandr Lukashenko’s equally repressive regime. In the sense that it will always be associated with its author-performer, Generation Jeans is similar to Grishkovets’s How I Ate a Dog. Neither will attract many other performers (fig. 21). Khalezin’s philosophical parable Here I Am (Ia prishel) won numerous awards in 2004 (including Nikolai Koliada’s annual Eurasia award) and was given an otherworldly staging by Aleksandr Galibin at the Stanislavsky Theatre in Moscow in 2008. In Here I Am, a recently deceased man, aided by a stern angel, must reconcile himself with family, friends, and colleagues before moving further through the bureaucracy of heaven.

Konstantin Kostenko, hailing from the far-eastern Russian city of Khabarovsk, attracted attention primarily with Claustrophobia (Klaustrofobiiia), which was originally staged by Nikolai Koliada in Ekaterinburg in 2003. The play relates the harsh and painful tale of a vulnerable youth in prison who becomes the target of a gangster and an intellectual, each of whom wants to possess the boy for his own sexual and emotional satisfaction (fig. 22). Kostenko, an openly gay author, places homosexuality at the center of his work as no other Russian writer does, while invariably keeping his focus sharply on such themes as identity and independence and the impossibility of fully realizing either. Claustrophobia was staged in Poland in 2005, while his plays Swine (Svin’i) and Hitler and Hitler (Gitler i Gitler) were produced in Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Serbia between 2006 and 2008.

The writer and director known simply as Klim is an enigma among the new artists of Russian drama and theatre. Having studied directing under two legendary directors, Anatolii Efros and Anatolii Vasil’ev, Klim attained the status of a cult figure in the late 1980s in Moscow. When his Moscow studio closed, he moved his base to St. Petersburg, where he staged gorgeous, award-winning productions at the Theatre on Liteinii. His directing career stalled by the late 1990s, however, and increasingly he
Figure 19. Aaron Bay Parkin and Rebecca Gross in Noah Birksted-Breen’s production of Natalia Moshina’s Techniques of Breathing in an Airlocked Space at the Sputnik Theatre, London (2006).

(Photo: Luke Tchalenko.)
Figure 20. Anastasia Marchuk in Viktoria Zvyagina’s production of Natalia Moshina’s Pulia at the Playwright and Director Center (2009). (Photo courtesy of the Playwright and Director Center.)

Figure 21. Nikolai Khalezin in his own Generation Jeans, a production of the Free Theatre of Minsk, Belarus (2005). (Photo courtesy of the May Readings Festival.)
devoted his time to writing. Most often, Klim plunders existing plots for his poetic and intellectually incisive works. For example, his *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Vladimir Berzin at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1999, shifted the focus of Shakespeare’s work by foregrounding usually peripheral characters such as Paris and Friar Laurence. Vladislav Troitskii staged numerous Klim plays at the DAKh Theatre in Kiev, where Klim lived for most of the 2000s. Among others, Troitskii produced *Seven Days with an Idiot* (*Sem’ dnei s Idiotom*), which serialized several of Klim’s independent texts based on Dostoevsky’s novel *The Idiot*. Klim’s sources are not always classical, however. *The Active Aspect of Eternity* (*Aktivnaia storona beskonechnosti*, 2002), a radical attack on complacency in the theatre, which began with a wordless pause that was held until the first spectator had the nerve to protest, was based on the writings of Carlos Castaneda. *The Little Match Girl* (*Devochka so spichkami*, 2007) used Hans Christian Andersen’s tale as the basis for a monologue about an aging actress locked in a love–hate relationship with her profession. It was performed in total darkness except for key moments when the actress would strike a match and hold it until it burned out. St. Petersburg director Aleksei Iankovskii staged these and other of Klim’s plays in St. Petersburg, Omsk, Riga, Latvia, and other cities. These efforts have done little more than simply reinforce Klim’s reputation as a cult figure, however; the real discovery of Klim as a writer is yet to come.

The situation surrounding Russian drama at the advent of the second decade of the twenty-first century is nothing like it was fifteen years earlier. If Klim can still be ignored in some quarters, it is not because people believe—as many did in the early 1990s—that there are no interesting writers. And if, in order to be noticed, Moshina’s first significant play had to begin its life outside of Russia, there now are people across the globe following carefully what is written in Russia as they search for the “next big
thing.” Iaroslava Pulinovich is a case in point. Her Natasha’s Dream was first produced in Saratov in 2008; its Moscow première was mounted in November 2009; in February 2010, it was included in a Russian drama festival in London, and in that same month was performed as part of a Russian theatre season at Towson University in Maryland. In the summer of 2010, the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center hosted Pulinovich for a month-long residency, during which time Natasha’s Dream was performed as a staged reading and she completed work on a new play. Thus in less than two years, this playwright’s identity evolved from promising provincial anonymity to rising international recognition.

The drama of post-communist Russia includes a vast array of personalities, styles, and themes. The poetic violence of Klavdiev stands alongside the cultured hipness of the Presniakov brothers, Kurochkin’s eclectic, altered states of time and space, and Sigarev’s tough, realistic portrayals of people living on or beyond the fringes of society. Teatr.doc’s politically provocative plays and productions are entirely unlike Mukhina’s intelligent, sensitive, and quirky works. Although Grishkovets and Vyrypaev tend to favor the monologue, their literary temperaments are vastly different, the former preferring sentimentality and calculated understatement, while the latter leans toward moral interrogation of the dark side of human experience. Such diversity was inconceivable prior to that summer in 1997 when Mukhina, Bogaev, and a community of Russian writers stood poised to change the status quo. The time of stagnation in Russian theatre and drama was past.

28 A disclosure: I was partially responsible for the production of Natasha’s Dream at Towson University in Towson, Maryland, but I had nothing to do with Iaroslava Pulinovich’s inclusion in the Sputnik Theatre’s festival in London or her residency at the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Connecticut.