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Theater in Russia

by Todd F. Edwards

Russia, Russia, Russia. The country has been in the news a lot lately, what with stories of collusion and election tampering, fake news and threats to the very fabric of our democracy. Add to this the fears still present in our minds from the Cold War and our often stereotypical portrayal of Russians as the villains in our films, television and even cartoons. Earlier this year I counted three Russian centered plot lines in one week spanning multiple TV shows across several networks. Yes, there are bad people in Russia, yes, there is a history of violence and corruption, yes, there are real threats and concerns but for 99% of the people in this country that is rich with art, culture and history, they want the same things out of life that each and everyone of us want.

I had a wonderful opportunity in January, 2019 to make my second



trip to Russia as part of a course offered at St. Olaf College entitled *Theater in Russia*. My first visit was as a sound designer and technical director for a show that toured from the USA. We had limited downtime and opportunity

to explore the wonders of the region and were not actually able to see a lot of theater on that trip. It was however, a life changing experience that left me wanting to come back. Fast forward fifteen years- I am assisting in a class alongside my colleague, Professor Marc Robinson, a talented theater director and Russian professor. Twenty students joined the course which included visiting palaces and museums, eating amazing food from the many cultures that are represented in Russia and of course seeing 26 theater productions in

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22 days. Those productions have had a profound impact on me as a theatrical designer. I now find myself questioning some of the concepts and ideologies of Western theatrical design.

The majority of the theater we experienced in Russia was from theaters organized in the "troupe" model which has a long history of numerous productions in repertory that theater companies can pull out and present at a moments notice. Many of the shows have been running for years and benefit as well as suffer from that longevity. Having the opportunity to live with a piece for years allows for a depth of understanding and exploration that we seldom experience in our Western theaters. The flip side to this is that some of these productions become worn and tired. Most of these troupes receive funding from the Russian government and while one might believe that this could potentially hamper creative expression, these productions are not required to be a financial success and that opens the doors for a level of exploration and interpretation unrivaled in many parts of the world today. While there is a constant overtone and maybe fear of governmental censorship and even retribution for expression that isn't "in line" with expectation, the Russian theater has been free to exist and thrive.

In addition to the troupe/repertory model that comprises the majority of the Russian theatrical landscape, the creative team is often quite small. We see more director-designers or an individual scenographer. In our Western model of theatre production there is often a director, scenic, lighting, costume, sound, and media designer. One could argue that the smaller Russian creative team of collaborators creates a production that is more one sided and less diverse or original in its ideology. While I am not advocating this model, I have learned to view its merits and come to respect it in ways that I wasn't able to prior to this experience. The Russian theatrical paradigm is one of extreme creativity and expression unbridled from traditional expectations. While meeting the needs of the script are important, the visual and aural impact that the design has on the audience seems to take the drivers seat. Many Russian designers have found that the visual stimulation and opportunity to delve deeper into the subtext and metaphorical aspects of the design elevate the theater going experience to new levels. As someone with a basest and rudimentary knowledge of the Russian language, I found that the impact of the visual and aural aesthetics drew me into the theatrical moment in powerful ways. I either overcame or forgot the language barrier all together. Mood and atmosphere take precedent over sightline concerns and historical accuracy. Music chosen for its evocative rhythms is often used to help set the mood with no concern that the lyrics are in English and unrelated to the story. Before experiencing this firsthand, I would have argued that the use of such choices were distracting at best or downright bad mistakes at worst. I believed that the questions that would be raised from these type of choices would not help answer the questions of the theatrical piece being presented and would arguably be influenced by the likes of the designer and not the needs of the piece itself. Now, I am not quite sure.

Four productions really stood out and supported these findings:

1. ***A Midsummer Night's Dream***

(<https://en.gogolcenter.com/events/performance/details/son-v-letnyuyu-noch>) directed by Kirill Serebrennikov. Produced at the Gogol Center

2. ***Mitya's Love*** (<https://en.gogolcenter.com/events/performance/details/mitina-lyubov>) directed by Vladislav Nastavshev. Produced at the Gogol Center.
3. ***Autum Dream*** (<http://lensov-theatre.spb.ru/repertoire/bolshaya-scena/son-ob-oseni/>) produced at the Lensoveta Theater. Directed by Yuri Butusov.
4. ***Hamlet*** (<http://lensov-theatre.spb.ru/repertoire/bolshaya-scena/gamlet/>) also at the Lensoveta. Directed by Yuri Butusov.

In the case of ***Midsummer***, we entered into a large blackbox theater with seating in alley configuration and a small greenhouse in the center of the stage. We watched the action as voyeurs through



obscured windows with no concern to sightlines. The audience is then taken to another level in the theater where the performance resumes in a space that has unrelated graffiti on the walls while the audience sits

on bleachers watching the action unfold between the lovers. (Photos: Todd F. Edwards)

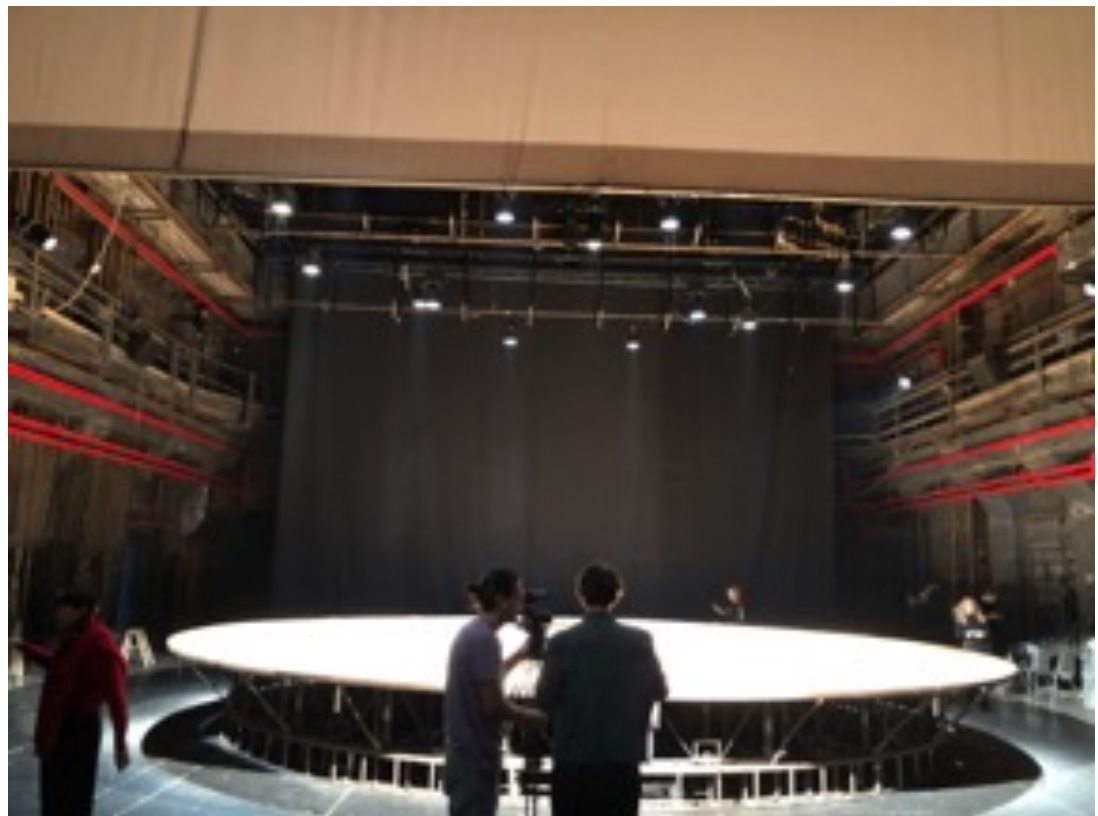


After intermission, we return to this space transformed into a totally different location.

This place is a hospital ward where the characters are being psychoanalyzed.
(Photos: Todd F. Edwards)



The piece returns again to the green house before going to another location in the theater where a large turntable is set up for the final moment.



Audience gathers around to view the final scene and even participates in the piece by assisting in the rotation of the turntable.

Mitya's Love includes a large back vertical surface with numerous holes that allow pegs to jut out from its face. It is mounted to a

turntable and other mundane items. The lights go down at the top of the show and when they return there are two actors in peak physical condition suspended from the pegs. The actors go about the action of the play moving from peg to peg



getting dressed, eating, listening to music, fighting and even making love all while suspended with no safety equipment.

Only at the end of the play do they come down from the wall.

(Photos: Todd F. Edwards)



Autumn Dream and *Hamlet* continue to provide exceptional visual metaphors and evocative designs. Using simple elements and elaborate theatrical tricks, their designs spoke to the pieces on a much deeper level than surface visuals alone. Often the set itself would alter the soundscape or make the perfect backdrop for an impromptu heavy metal number to break out in the middle of the scene- this is alienation that would have made Brecht proud, but in many ways served to ground the production more than if those elements were left out.

Hamlet used numerous wine bottles that were moved by the actors throughout the production. These movements were choreographed and accentuated by the “clinking” together of the bottles acting as elements of the aural landscape. Some of these scene changes took upwards of 3 minutes and were as much a part of the storytelling as the play itself. Wooden planks were brought out and ceremoniously placed on the stage to create new locations but to also change the sound quality of the playing space.



(All *Hamlet* photos from the



production's official website)

The design for *Autumn Dream*, included balloons dropping from the rafters, a water balloon fight at the

dinner table viscerally showing the dysfunctional relationships of the characters as well as actors on stilts with haunting music. This takes a play set in a unassuming grave yard and turns it on it's heels. Make sure you watch the trailer here...

<http://lensov-theatre.spb.ru/repertoire/bolshaya-scena/son-ob-oseni/>

(All *Autumn Dream* photos from the production's official website)





While I am not ready to fully embrace a shift away from design choices that are firmly rooted in the telling of the story, I do plan to challenge myself as a designer and put forward a challenge to others to look deeper than the text and explore a more visceral experience in our designs. Staying true to the needs of the production should stay paramount. Fully exploring juxtaposition of styles as well as visual metaphors, and not being afraid to make our audience a little uncomfortable or have them leave the theatre with more questions than they came with may be that extra spice to challenge us as designers and our audience as spectators. As always, use sparingly- a little dash may go a long way. []

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