

Contents

Preface	ix
More than Mere Drama: the Phenomenon of New Russian Drama An Introduction	3
Yury Klavdiev	17
<i>Martial Arts</i>	20
Olga Mukhina	47
<i>Flying</i>	50
Pavel Pryazhko	109
<i>Panties</i>	112
<i>Angry Girl</i>	156
Vasily Sigarev	181
<i>Phantom Pains</i>	184
Maksym Kurochkin	207
<i>Kitchen</i>	211
Mikhail Durnenkov	287
<i>Trash</i>	290
Vyacheslav Durnenkov	333
<i>Exhibits</i>	336

viii Contents

Yaroslava Pulinovich	403
<i>Natasha's Dream</i>	406
<i>I Won</i>	423
Yelena Gremina	439
<i>One Hour, Eighteen Minutes</i>	442
Maxim Osipov	463
<i>Scapegoats</i>	466

More than Mere Drama: The Phenomenon of New Russian Drama

An Introduction

1. Setting the Stage

There is a phrase in Russian culture that remains meaningful no matter how you transform it; “A poet in Russia is more than a poet.” Those in the field of theater often use the phrase to declare that “theater in Russia is more than theater.” The point is that Russian artists have an intensity, a merit and therefore a significance that goes beyond face value.

Anna Akhmatova’s great poem *Requiem* bears witness to the tragedy of the Purges in the late 1930s, a series of events that left no individual untouched. In a brief, but famous, preface added decades later, she wrote:

I was, then, with my people,
There, where, sadly, my people were.

The poet was with her people in their time of tragedy and, for the most part, the people knew that and admired it. Akhmatova, accordingly, still is one of those poets in Russia who is more than a poet.

Russia at the advent of the twenty-first century is less dangerous than the Soviet Union about which Akhmatova wrote. In fact, the first decade of the new millennium officially became known as a period of stability. Succeeding Boris Yeltsin in 2000, Russian president Vladimir Putin often reminded his people – especially after he shut down television stations daring to question his policies – that he had replaced the volatility of Boris Yeltsin’s 1990s

with strength and stability. Increasingly, though, the Putin years (including Dmitry Medvedev's presidential "interregnum" from 2008 to 2012) became synonymous with corruption, institutional arrogance and lies.

Of all the art forms, theater – or to be more specific, drama – responded best and most quickly to these developments in society and politics. Drama, in Russia of the early twenty-first century, became more than mere drama. In fact, it acquired the designation of "new drama," and emerged as the culture's leading means of artistic expression. This did not happen all at once; the changes were neither unified, nor universally accepted. But by the beginning of the century's second decade, writers, actors, directors, critics, journalists, sociologists and spectators, alike, were flocking to playwrighting festivals and looking out to discover the best new plays and playwrights.

Russian drama of this time fulfilled the need for intelligent, provocative discussion that other art forms could not or did not provide. Traditional literature, that is prose and poetry, did not command as much popular attention or respect as it had at various times in Russia's past. Books lost their mystique; and, after a brief flourishing in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, bookstores disappeared as they had elsewhere in the world. Cinema, but for isolated exceptions, wallowed in a thematic and financial crisis that carried over from the Perestroika era in the late 1980s. Television did what it seems to do best – churning out mind-numbing pabulum that encouraged people to settle for bad taste and low expectations. In this confused and sometimes retrograde artistic environment the so-called new drama took on issues that were controversial not only for Russian theater – homelessness, violence, suicide, abuse of sex and alcohol, life in prisons, mental hospitals, mines and factories. Playwrights sought to replace a language of false literary sensibilities with genuine, unadorned Russian as it was spoken in the new century. To a large extent, new dramatists sought to do what Akhmatova had done seven decades earlier: stand with the common people and share their experience.

New drama flourished (almost) exclusively in small spaces, often in dingy basements that employed and accommodated small numbers of people. The big theaters largely turned a blind eye to

what was happening on small stages and in backrooms in playhouses, libraries and community centers in a few chosen hot spots around Russia – primarily Moscow, Yekaterinburg and Togliatti. In many cases, they took actively hostile stances toward it. This would change, however. And by the beginning of the century's second decade, new drama was threatening to become a mainstream phenomenon. Not every theater staged plays associated with new drama, but almost every one began staging plays influenced by the themes, methods and language of the new drama movement.

This was an enormous turnaround from the 1980s and 1990s when there were precious few places a writer could go for information, education or encouragement if he or she wished to write a play. In 1990 a lone festival, housed in, and named after Konstantin Stanislavsky's Lyubimovka estate outside of Moscow, came into being. In the early 1990s Nikolai Kolyada in Yekaterinburg opened the first school for playwrights. In 1998 playwrights Alexei Kazantsev and Mikhail Roshchin created Moscow's and Russia's first theater for playwrights – the Playwright and Director Center. By the early 2000s these relatively isolated developments had become part of a larger movement. In Moscow in 2002 the well-organized New Drama Festival was founded, as was Teatr.doc, a scrappy basement venue created by playwrights Yelena Gremina and Mikhail Ugarov in order to explore documentary and reality-based drama exclusively. Kolyada instituted a powerful new play competition named Eurasia in 2003. At around the same time, in Togliatti, playwright Vadim Levanov transformed the annual May Readings poetry contest into a successful festival for the development and staging of new plays.

The words “new drama” in the early to mid-2000s were on everyone's lips.

The New Drama Debate

What is new drama? Why is it that, even now, more than a decade after the term gained currency, we still struggle to define it?

These two innocuous words are not capable of embracing everything recent cultural history has asked them to stand for. At the same time, they come closest to describing the movement they have

come to define – much in the way, perhaps, that, for awhile, the term New Russians came to define successful individuals in the 1990s. It must be remembered that new drama was coined specifically both as the title of a festival and as an ideological slogan providing leverage for those whose purpose it was to take a proactive approach to the still-stagnating status of drama in Russian theater in the early 2000s. In other words, the name came first and a manufactured reality followed it. This irritated many who, in the early years especially, saw the movement as more artificial than organic. It also brought about huge potential for change.

New drama, especially by its enemies in the earlier years, was often considered an offspring of what in Russian in the 1980s and 1990s was called *chernukha*, or, as I have translated that pithy word elsewhere, gloom, doom, bile and jaundice colored with foul-mouthed insolence. Characters freely used obscenities – something that was still taboo in theaters – and their conduct was anything but model behavior. These plays often looked at the underbelly of society to find meaning.

The goal among writers was to strip the dramatic text of the perfumes and conceits that had crystallized on its surface over the last 250 years. Famously, Mikhail Ugarov – a founder at both the New Drama Festival and Teatr.doc – railed against metaphors in dramatic writing. Poetry, literature and metaphors were to be swept aside in favor of reality, simplicity, directness and unblinking honesty. The ideal plot was not something dreamed up by a creative mind it was drawn from real events and the experiences of real people.

That was the theory. What took place was something different and more complex. There never were definite boundaries or characteristics that would have allowed us to declare with certainty that a specific play or playwright belonged to the new drama. The writers coming out of Kolyada's school in Yekaterinburg wrote gritty, uncouth, socially-oriented plays that seemingly should have satisfied most in the new drama crowd. But the majority of them, Kolyada included, denied kinship with, and even expressed an open hostility to, the style. Meanwhile, some of the biggest early new drama successes plainly violated the "no metaphor, no literature" rules. Ivan Vyrypaev's *Oxygen*, a flagship of the movement, was a highly poetic piece that creatively adapted segments of the Ten

Commandments in a modern setting. Klim, a playwright and director who composes richly nuanced texts carved out of great novels, plays and fairy tales of the past, had one of the biggest successes at the first New Drama Festival with “The Active Side of Eternity,” a bold, interpretive dramatization of the writings of Carlos Castaneda. In fact, Klim’s rich, experimental texts were antithetical to the strivings of new drama. Maksym Kurochkin, a central and active figure in the new drama movement, is the author of highly imaginative plays that experiment with language, time, plot and structure on a level with the best poets in the Russian literary canon.

As a term, then, new drama is a knot of contradictions. In fact, it cannot be pinned down and, therefore, cannot be used precisely in a simple, descriptive way. None of that means that what took place under and around the banner of new drama was not a powerful, transformative force for Russian theater. This we can state with certainty: the new drama movement exerted an enormous influence on theater art. Russian theater before and after new drama are two vastly different cultural spaces.

New drama is probably best understood as a broad phenomenon that applies more to a time period than to any specific manner of writing. Crucially, the new drama era provoked vigorous, important, strategic and artistic arguments. It encouraged those who never thought about writing plays to become playwrights – one of the quintessential new drama authors, Yury Klavdiev, has said he thought theater and writing plays were a boring pursuit until he saw a live performance of Vyrypaev’s *Oxygen*. The theory and reality of the new drama crusade inspired directors and actors who were fed up with the same old Chekhov-Ostrovsky treadmill to seek new avenues of expression. The plays that follow bear witness to, and were instruments of, that change.

The Plays, chronologically

Maksym Kurochkin’s *Kitchen*, written and produced in 2000, is one of the watersheds of recent Russian drama. Before it, there was Olga Mukhina’s hit *Tanya-Tanya* in 1996, a play that appeared when virtually no one in Russia would admit a contemporary could write a good play. As *Tanya-Tanya* ushered in an era when new plays again

became a natural part of the theatrical process, *Kitchen* ushered in the age in which new plays would become a status symbol for theaters. As any explosion might, it blew out the walls still hindering the forward path for new writers and new plays. It was grossly misinterpreted by the critics – not at all an unusual thing – but it was a huge hit with audiences, and it developed a fierce cult following among the young. It is the only play in this selection that was mounted on a big stage, directed and acted by a star – the matinee idol Oleg Menshikov.

Kitchen brings to mind Henry James's designation of Leo Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace* as a "large loose baggy monster." Lurching back and forth from the time of the Nibelungs and Attila the Hun to contemporary Russia, it surely is that. It is a mix of high poetry and scullery chatter. It is an intellectual and philosophical drama, and it is a comic travesty of history. It is a spoof of hip Russia in 2000 and a profoundly moral work that engages some of the most painful, intricate debates of its time. It questions whether mankind has advanced at all since the Dark Ages, and seeks to debate what surely is one of the most sinister conundrums of our time: What do we do with cultural memory? We are doomed, the play suggests, if we forget our past. But we are damned if we remember it, for surely, then, we will be compelled to seek revenge for past offenses against us. If that sounds like a dark place to leave a play, it is always worth remembering that the best art asks questions, it doesn't answer them. That is for the rest of us to do.

Emerging shortly after Kurochkin was Vasily Sigarev. In 2002 a Moscow production of his play *Plasticene* signaled the appearance of a distinctive writer. With its visions of violence and cruelty, it became one of the poster plays of the early new drama movement. Sigarev was one of several writers from Yekaterinburg to achieve international renown. Others included Oleg Bogaev, the Presnyakov Brothers and Nikolai Kolyada, who was Sigarev and Bogaev's teacher. Bogaev's *The Russian National Postal Service* and the Presnyakovs' *Playing the Victim* had significant resonance in England and the United States, but Sigarev arguably eclipsed them all.

Phantom Pains is a terse little play that pushes its characters up against a wall. In a most basic sense, it explores what happens

when a young man doesn't think about his actions. A squeaky-clean, semi-intellectual student unexpectedly finds himself playing the role of abuser and lover all at once. What are the consequences of that, and what of the excruciating psychic pain experienced by the person next to him while he muddles through his small moral battles? As in most of what he writes, Sigarev is merciless in his portrayal of the depths a person can sink to of their own volition.

When Olga Mukhina chose to direct her new play *Flying* in 2005, eight years had passed since she wrote her previous play *YoU*. Russia had changed radically. Boris Yeltsin's creeping wars in the Caucasus, his volatile economic policies and his valiant, if disordered, attempt to bring about democracy and free speech had been replaced by the officially declared optimism and stability of Vladimir Putin's regime. A new generation of thirty-somethings – the very individuals who might be influenced by the new drama movement – found themselves occupying positions of power, with pockets full of money, and plenty of time on their hands for recreation of the legal and illegal kind.

The early Putin years gave rise to a social stratum that was entirely new to Russia – the young, hip, well-heeled office worker. These weren't the bosses yet, but they were nothing like the old desk-bound bureaucrats of the Soviet or Tsarist traditions. These were smart, capable, informed, ambitious young people. Their clothes and accessories were western, but bought in Russian boutiques. They might or might not read *War and Peace*, but they surely read *Playboy* and *Cosmopolitan*. In Russian. *Flying* was the first play to turn a probing eye toward this phenomenon of hip, empowered youth. Not surprisingly it found chinks in the armor and cracks in the facade.

New drama hit something of a wall at mid-decade in the 2000s. New names were not moving in to join the ranks of those who had already made an impact, while some established writers, such as Mikhail Ugarov and Yelena Gremina, quit writing plays. The period from 1998 to 2003 had seen an enormous number of writers establish reputations. By 2005 it seemed as though the well might have gone dry. That two-year lag seems trivial in retrospect; but at the time, it had the feeling of a long, barren journey on a dead-end road. In fact, at that moment a new wave of writers began to ap-

pear. The primary source for this was the city of Togliatti, although Minsk, in Belarus, also made a contribution.

Vadim Levanov's May Readings in Togliatti proved to be one of the most potent sources for new plays outside of Nikolai Kolyada's Yekaterinburg. The first of the so-called "Togliatti phenomenon" to emerge were two brothers, Vyacheslav and Mikhail Durnenkov. Like the Presnyakov brothers Oleg and Vladimir, the Durnenkovs wrote together. The first of their plays to have an impact was called *The Cultural Layer*, a story with fantastic elements that explored the various individuals and, therefore, problems that had inhabited a single apartment over a period of decades. Published in 2005, it opened the floodgates for what might be called the second wave of new drama to hit Russian stages. In relatively short succession between 2005 and 2007 important new plays by Yury Klavdiev, Levanov, the Durnenkovs and the highly unique Pavel Pryazhko from Minsk came to light.

Klavdiev's plays packed a punch of violence and tenderness in a way that was fresh and unexpected. His influences were obvious – Quentin Tarantino, John Ford, Ang Lee and Japanese animé – but his sensibility was purely Russian. He wrote strong women into his plays; and more often than not, teenagers or even children were the focus of his interest. A deep, if paradoxical, moral conviction underlies every one of his works. His *Martial Arts* puts a pair of pre-teens into a pitched battle with drug dealers and corrupt narcotics agents. The results are as hilarious as they are harrowing. It is a combination of which Klavdiev is a master.

Writing alone, each of the Durnenkovs turned out plays of significance. In *Exhibits* Vyacheslav set himself the task of writing a purposefully "old-fashioned" family drama with strong social undertones. He declared that new drama had spent time enough in basements and on small stages, and he wanted to write a big play for a big stage. (For the record, its premiere in Moscow was performed on the tiny Teatr.doc basement stage.) Based in part on a real event that occurred in a small town south of Moscow, it pits two clans against each other, somewhat, though only loosely, in the fashion of *Romeo and Juliet*. But the real conflict arises as the result of two Moscow city slickers proposing to turn the small town into a living museum. If town residents agree to play the parts of their

ancestors for tourists a few hours each week, the city will thrive financially. But what effect will this have on their dignity?

Mikhail Durnenkov's *Trash*, in its way, is another exploration of the contemporary Russian's struggle for a dignified existence. "I'm not trash," one young character declares in response to a humiliating verbal attack. "How you gonna prove it?" his nemesis shoots back. The characters here are buffeted by poverty, aimlessness, a sense of not belonging, addiction to drugs and to taking risks. But perhaps the central figures are two forlorn mothers, whose sons are lost to them, even if their love is not. This is a world where love exists but no one seems to realize it. Looming over the story is the very structure of the play. In actual fact, *Trash* depicts a doleful screenwriter trying in vain to satisfy the demands of a boorish film producer. This kind of cold-nosed irony is typical not only of Durnenkov but of many of new drama writers.

One of the most wickedly ironic playwrights of them all is Pavel Pryazhko. He appeared with a trio of plays, *The Third Shift*, *Panties*, and *Life is Grand*, that took Moscow's progressive basement theaters by storm. The first aimed an acidic gaze at the cruelties and corruptions of a children's camp, while the last was a rather astonishing accomplishment: It told a four-way love story employing an unprecedented quantity of obscenities. Several plays in this era – including Maksym Kurochkin's *Vodka*, *Fucking*, *Television* – made efforts to topple the taboo against obscenities on stage, but it was *Life is Grand*, following the lead of *Panties*, that can be said to have done it. As funny and touching as it was bracing, it became Pryazhko's biggest hit.

Panties, which won grand prize in the 2007 play competition organized by the Free Theater of Minsk, is many things in one. It is a satire of a society that has lost its taste and capability for grand ideas and deeds. It joyously mocks literary traditions while renewing them in a contemporary setting. As if springing like a crassly colored plastic toy from the hoary depths of a Greek tragedy, a young woman undertakes a heroine's journey when she discovers that someone stole her underwear from her clothing line. So intent is she upon establishing the truth of the crime that she apparently is willing, like Joan of Arc, to be burned at the stake. Pryazhko's inventiveness, his humor, and his ability to engage serious themes in

a purposefully frivolous setting, were signs that still another writer of importance had emerged.

The pioneering playwrights of the 1990s, those who fought indifference and hostility to bring their work to the public even in small ways, were predominantly women. Yelena Gremina, Olga Mukhina, Nadezhda Ptushkina, Olga Mikhailova and Yelena Isaeva were just a few of them. For whatever historical, cultural and random reasons, the new plays making impact in the first decade of the 21st century were usually written by men. Mukhina's *Flying* was an exception, as were Natalya Vorozhbyt's *Galka Motalko*, Nina Belenitskaya's *My God – Pavlik* and Natalia Moshina's *Pulya* and *Techniques of Breathing in an Air-Locked Space*. Still, the discovery of the young Yaroslava Pulinovich and the return of Gremina were important events as the turn of the century's second decade approached.

Pulinovich, still another former student of Nikolai Kolyada in Yekaterinburg, burst on the scene with a short monologue, *Natasha's Dream*. It was published in a journal in 2008 and within two years had been staged throughout the country and the world. The tale of a teenage girl living a difficult and dangerous life in an orphanage struck a chord with many. Both victim and victimizer, the poor, sensitive and angry Natasha is battered by the insurmountable weight of her troubled background and her idealistic, woefully simplistic strivings for romantic love. Her vulnerability and the injustice that society and the construct of God's world impose upon her are overwhelming and dramatically convincing.

Pulinovich wrote an equally powerful companion piece to *Natasha's Dream* called *I Won*. It considers a similar problem – a young woman making her way in the world around her – only this time from the opposite side of the spectrum. *I Won* considers the plight of a privileged teenager who is always successful at everything she does. These plays in English have come to be known collectively as The Natasha Plays.

Yelena Gremina, a prolific playwright in the 1990s, spent most of the 2000s writing teleplays, and running the Lyubimovka play festival and Teatr.doc. In 2005 she crafted a text called *September.doc* that sought to raise questions about Russia's reaction to the horrific 2004 terrorist attack on a school in Beslan in the Russian Caucasus.

It was comprised of textual fragments drawn from commentaries, blogs, interviews and journalistic reports on the topic. Although the production was short-lived, *September.doc* was noteworthy for being one of the first overtly political dramatic statements to come out of the new drama movement. Despite new drama's fascination with social problems, it virtually never took on politics directly. That changed in a significant way with Gremina's *One Hour, Eighteen Minutes* in 2010.

One Hour, Eighteen Minutes was a direct response to the death in November 2009 of Sergei Magnitsky in prison. Magnitsky was an attorney investigating corruption charges against high-placed Russian officials. Before his work could bring anyone to justice, he was arrested on corruption charges himself and then, as is now assumed, murdered in an isolation cell eight days before the government was compelled by law either to charge him officially or let him go. The year of incarceration leading to Magnitsky's death included a series of bone-chilling actions – or refusals to act – on the part of Russian law enforcement agencies and the legal system. Gremina, employing the verbatim or documentary method of drama, took texts available in the public domain – interviews, official statements and reports, investigative journalistic articles – and turned them into a play that held Magnitsky's jailers and killers to account. It was another watershed moment in the recent chronicle of Russian drama, in part because of the power of the play itself, and in part because it coincided with a growing protest movement in Russian society at large.

One of the most interesting developments of the new drama movement was the transformation that occurred in the work of Pavel Pryazhko. His early obscenity-filled tales about outcasts and losers gradually gave way to experimental, minimalist texts, the sophistication of which was probably matched among his peers only by Maksym Kurochkin. But where Kurochkin's was a complicated, baroque manner of writing, Pryazhko began seeking to strip his texts of everything but essentials. One of his most radical efforts, *I am Free*, consisted of 535 photographs to be shown as a computerized slide show accompanied by a dozen laconical spoken phrases.

Closer to traditional drama in form, but still playing fast and loose with many of its basic rules, was Pryazhko's *Angry Girl*. First

produced in 2012, it dares to tread territory on the banal surfaces of the lives of a group of young twenty- to thirty-somethings. It eschews plot complication almost entirely. The worlds of dream and imagination flow freely into the characters' waking lives. Some of the most prominent, repeated events, if they can be so called, are people turning lamps on and off, sitting on sofas or waiting for others. Most of the dialogue, of which there is relatively little, centers on mundane exchanges. Author's directions are so extensive as to make the text look in places like a short story. The substance of the tale that is told so unusually emerges in carefully placed details that attract our attention briefly, but significantly. Consider the way that the image of a character dropping money into beggars' hands changes our understanding of the story as a whole. *Angry Girl* has a sense of magic to it. While seeming to do little, it paints a powerful, nuanced picture of the world young Russians inhabit in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

This anthology concludes with Maxim Osipov's *Scapegoats*, a play that has no demonstrable connection to new drama. This is important because, for all its influence and achievements, the movement that we call new drama was selective. Many playwrights of value remained outside its province, and Osipov is one of those. *Scapegoats* draws its inspiration from more traditional sources, such as Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment* and the classic detective tale, while seeking to subvert both – the author defines its genre as an “eccentric prank.” However, there is no mistaking the serious, even harsh (though funny) picture it paints of contemporary Russian society. A murder is committed inexplicably among a group of friends celebrating a reunion, and when the police begin to investigate, things grow murky indeed. This, in fact, is the kind of story that many a new drama writer would have loved to have written in order to explore the specific realities of some crime followed by punishment. Instead, in Osipov's hands, the tale remains at all times a literary construct, filled with literary references and philosophical conceit. There is, in other words, more Franz Kafka in *The Scapegoats* than street cred.

The history of new Russian drama and the drama of its time has yet to be written. It is too early to draw firm conclusions about it for the phenomenon itself continues to unfold. New writers, new plays

and new trends are emerging as these words are written. One thing is certain, however: The first decade or so of the new century unleashed a boom in dramatic writing that had not been experienced in Russia since the 1920s. In these few short years an unprecedented number of writers conspired to change the face of Russian dramatic literature. This anthology provides a few snapshots of that change.

John Freedman
Moscow, February 2014