

An Englishman From France Who Writes about Russia

By [John Freedman](#)

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I have had a soft spot in my heart for Bernard Besserglik ever since I met him nearly a decade ago.

Bernard, when he was a Moscow correspondent for Agence France Presse from January 2001 to the autumn of 2004, did what almost no foreign correspondent does in this city: He gave more than lip service to what anyone will tell you is Russia's greatest asset — its culture.

Oh, sure, you see stories crop up in the foreign press from time to time that are triggered by big budgets, hyped public relations campaigns or political echoes arising in the Russian arts. But rarely do journalists take a genuine interest in the arts themselves and cover the topic with knowledge and understanding.

Bernard did that while he was here. He attended the theater, festivals, concerts

and exhibitions and wrote about them whenever he could. He traveled one year to St. Petersburg to cover the Golden Mask Festival that was being held in that city.

What I didn't know, but learned shortly after Bernard retired in 2004, was how deeply Russian theater had affected him. Within a year or so he began sending me drafts of a libretto he was writing for a musical.

Nevertheless, I still had no idea just how great that influence had been until Bernard came through Moscow last week and we had a chance to renew our acquaintance.

"For me, Paris is movies," said Bernard, an Englishman who has called France home for decades. "Moscow, more than anything, is theater."

As if wishing to emphasize that thought a few minutes later, he added, "Much of my happiest time in Moscow was going to the theater." And apparently that was so true that when he began working on his musical he set it, of all places, in the Kremlin. The premise of the piece is no less screwball than any other musical I know of: It brings together Harpo Marx and Joseph Stalin for a wacky meeting in Moscow in the 1930s.

Bernard's "[A Night in the Kremlin](#)," enjoyed a small production last summer in New York. With music by Bob Barton, and direction by the Romanian Cosmin Chivu, it ran for six nights over a three-week period as part of the Midtown International Theater Festival.

To hear more of Bernard's take on Moscow and on his hopes for "A Night in the Kremlin," click on the icon below.

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