

In Memory of Roman Kozak, 1957-2010

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One of many exceptional memories I have of Roman Kozak is from the year 2000. He still had not yet accepted the appointment as artistic director at the Pushkin Theater; that would come one year later. At this point he still was working as a staff director at the Moscow Art Theater.

But this particular memory has to do with another theater altogether &mdash the Chelovek Theater Studio, a tiny venue that had enormous meaning for Moscow and Russian theater in the 1970s and 1980s. Kozak was involved in several famous productions at the Chelovek. He performed brilliantly as an actor in Mikhail Mokeyev's landmark production of Slawomir Mrozek's "The Emigrants" in 1984. He himself staged and acted in a famous production of Lyudmila Petrushevskaya's "Cinzano" there in 1987. Both shows toured Europe in the Perestroika era as examples of a newly revived Russian theater.

But in 2000, 15 years older and perhaps that much wiser, Kozak and his cohorts got together once again to perform these shows as part of a 25th anniversary of the mighty little Chelovek Studio.

It was a revelation. Their performances were inspired, rich and full-blooded. This was no mere exercise in shadow boxing with former glory. All of the actors — and Kozak was their obvious leader, on stage and off — delivered hilarious, powerful, devastating performances.

Many questioned whether it was worth it for the "old men" to go back out on stage in their old roles. I, perhaps, wondered that myself. I had seen the original "Emigrants" in 1988 during the original run and the brilliance of Kozak and his acting partner Alexander Feklistov was etched forever in my mind.

But if anything, the 2000 performance was even better. Both actors brought to it an urgency and a wisdom they simply could not have had 15 years earlier.

I'll never forget seeing Roman and his wife Alla Sigalova come waltzing out of the theater after the last of a full month of performances. Neither Alla nor Roman had ever been the kind of people who express great emotion publicly, but at this moment, as they got into their car on the darkened, empty street, they looked like kids going dancing after the prom, or, perhaps, like athletes who had just won a world championship.

There was elation and strength and eternal youth in their step, their gazes and their voices.

Kozak, a director, actor and teacher who had an enormous impact on Moscow theater over three decades, was buried Sunday at the Troyekuroskoye cemetery in Moscow. He died late Thursday evening of cancer of the throat. He was 52 years old.

At a memorial service Sunday morning at the Pushkin Theater, which Kozak ran for nine years, actors, directors, journalists, producers and friends spoke words of love and respect for the man they had known and worked with.

Vera Alentova, the leading actress at the Pushkin, noted that Kozak renewed the theater when he took over the reins in 2001. "When Roman Kozak came," she said, "he brought a whole new audience with him. And critics began noticing us again, too."

Konstantin Raikin, fighting back tears, spoke about how he first was amazed by Kozak's talent when he attended a performance of "The Emigrants" in the 1980s, how in the 1990s he came to marvel at Kozak's prowess as a teacher at the Moscow Art Theater School and how the two became fast friends when in 2005 they both performed in a show called "The Cosmetic of the Enemy."

"Roman was younger than I," Raikin said as he struggled to maintain composure, "But I will always consider myself his pupil."

Genrietta Yanovskaya, the artistic director of the Young Spectator Theater, told of seeing Kozak frequently in Europe in the 1980s. Yanovskaya then frequently toured to festivals with her famous production of "The Heart of a Dog," while Kozak often performed at the same festivals in "The Emigrants" and "Cinzano."

Kozak made "beautiful, elegant art," Yanovskaya said. "And everything about Kozak and that art spoke of a beautiful, elegant future. How horrible it is that Roman Kozak has now ceased to be a part of the future."

Indeed, everything about Kozak had to do with renewal and revival. He first appeared on the stage of the Moscow Art Theater in the early 1980s along with several other young actors who made it clear that a new generation was ready to be heard. Then came his collaboration with Lyudmila Roshkovan's Chelovek, or Human, Theater Studio. Throughout the 1990s, Kozak worked as a staff director at the Moscow Art Theater, providing new blood and new direction for a playhouse that was struggling to find its way in a vastly changed society.

At the Art Theater, he made several attempts with varying degrees of success to merge experimental theater with the needs of a large repertory house. His production of Mrozek's "Love in Crimea" in 1995 was a huge, beautiful piece that never quite found its rhythm. Another large, quirky, often funny and beautiful production was Nikolai Yevreinov's "The Main Thing" in 1999.

Kozak's most popular work at the Art Theater was arguably his star-studded interpretation of Nikolai Gogol's "The Marriage" in 1997.

Also in the 1990s, Kozak staged numerous interesting productions for independent companies. His rendition of Mrozek's "Widows," under the title of "Banana" was not only one of the most intriguing productions of 1994, but it also brought Kozak together with choreographer and dancer Sigalova, whom he subsequently would marry.

In 2001, Kozak took on a task that many considered "mission impossible" when he accepted an appointment as the artistic director of the Pushkin Theater on Tverskoi Bulvar. For decades, the Pushkin had been known as a "dead" and "cursed" theater, a house to which no success could come and few spectators ventured.

Kozak hit the ground running, mounting a spectacular small-stage show called "Academy of Laughter," by the Japanese playwright Koki Mitani. It was a sensitive and funny piece that caught two people locked in a battle that ultimately made them partners in a shared nightmare. Most of all, it was a tour de force of acting by Kozak's two-man cast. It was a monstrous hit and, all of a sudden, Muscovites were beating down the door at the box office at the Pushkin Theater.

Kozak followed in 2002 with another hit — Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," featuring numerous actors making their professional debuts. Several of them have since gone on to stardom.

In short, the curse was broken, and the Pushkin had become one of Moscow's most popular venues again. Over the next nine years, Kozak and others staged countless shows that have been among each season's top draws. Foremost among them was the moving dramatization of Amelie Nothomb's novel "The Cosmetic of the Enemy."

Just 20 days before his death, Kozak premiered his last production, Alexander Ostrovsky's "Mad Money," a fast-paced, colorful comedy.

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