

# An American Director Meets Russian Theater

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In the New York theater world, Lear deBessonet hangs out in that territory where the future is headed. What that means is that she doesn't do things the way everyone else does, and, in my book, that makes her worth watching.

In 2009, deBessonet directed a punk-Gypsy version of "Don Quixote." Her production of Bertolt Brecht's "St. Joan of the Stockyards" (which the Guardian in London called "terrific") was created in collaboration with country-blues musician Kelley McCrae. While working at the National Opera Theater in Kazakhstan, she mounted a tri-lingual opera called "In the Dark Ages."

DeBessonet, the founder and artistic director of Stillpoint Productions in New York, has her own take on things, and she is highly qualified to appreciate people taking their own road in the arts.

And that is just what the director has been doing in Moscow for the last four days — checking out what Russian directors are up to these days. She arrived late last week to attend the Russian Case festival, a showcase for foreigners within the ongoing Golden Mask Festival, and she hit the ground running, seeing seven shows in her first four days here.

I caught up with deBessonnet on Monday afternoon at the wonderful Avocado vegetarian restaurant on Chistiye Prudy across from the Sovremennik Theater. As I am wont to do, I pulled out my trusty Nikon, aimed it at my victim and demanded that she bare her soul right there on the spot.

Dmitry Krymov's production of "Tararabumbia," also denoted as "Tararaboom-de-boom" in the Russian Case program, provided deBessonnet with a "rapturous evening of theater." The show, she said, was a "theater of images at its most human, and really grounded."

Particularly interesting in this show, which is defined as "a procession" of characters from Anton Chekhov plays, was the way the actors were able to create fully fleshed-out roles even in brief snippets of scenes.

"Even in a 20-second across as Masha, the actor really played Masha," deBessonnet explained.

Mindaugas Karabauskis' production of "A Stalemate Lasts but a Moment" at the National Youth Theater was also impressive. This adaptation of Icchokas Meras' novel about the Holocaust revealed an "elegance of directing," declared deBessonnet.

"I thought I might have seen enough shows about the Holocaust," she added, "but what allowed me to enter [this show] was that there was no emotional indulgence."

Speaking of all the shows that she had seen by the time of our chat, deBessonnet explained that she was taken by two elements in particular — the "directorial precision," which she found so compelling, and the fact that Russian actors know that "what they are contributing to their culture is highly valued."

Actors here "aren't doing theater until they can get a television job," she said with admiration.

Also noteworthy in her opinion is the way Russian theater so easily adapts prose to the stage. She named "Stalemate" and Dmitry Yegorov's production of "The Killer" at the Moscow Theater Yunogo Zritelya as examples of works where actors slip back and forth between speaking the words of a narrator or a character. For the record, she could also have included Kama Ginkas' production of Nikolai Gogol's "The Diary of a Madman."

"That is not a familiar trope in the theater I see," deBessonnet said. "It allows for an incredibly rich psychological realism" while it also "blocks sentimentality."

Finally, deBessonnet admitted that her designer would love the way that so many Russian shows are openly theatrical and spurn the laws of television and cinema.

"Almost every play we saw here happens in a room," she stated. "It is not an imitation of film."

To hear more of Lear deBessonet's fascinating and astute comments on the work she has seen this week in Moscow, click on the image above.

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