

Doing It for the Kids

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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"It is a truth universally acknowledged that an expat wife in possession of some spare time must be in want of a charity to spend it on." (With apologies to Jane Austen and to lovers of "Pride and Prejudice" everywhere...)

That expat wife, ladies and gentleman, would be me. And I make no apologies for it; why should I? I work hard every day of the week to keep this expat family on an even keel in this demanding city, to maintain my own equilibrium, and to try and earn some jam to put on our bread and butter through my writing and consulting, etc. But it's easy — as an expat — to live life inside a bubble, removed from many people's reality, and in an effort to escape that I also help out at one local Russian charity and have just taken on a project for Action for Russian Children (ARC), which means I get to visit a number of others.

All the charities I'm visiting benefit in some way from involvement through ARC, and it's a fascinating and enlightening opportunity to see a part of life that frankly is not normally on display in Moscow. If you find yourself as the parent of a disabled child here, there is less support than in many other countries, and this often means that residential care — shut away

from the hubbub of everyday life — is the only viable option for your child. Some of the charities that ARC helps are dedicated to finding a way around this and to keeping such families together. Others, like one I visited this week — Open Art Theatre, a musical theater group for young people and adults with Down syndrome and mental disability — are more involved in providing opportunities for children and young adults to live their lives in a way that the rest of us take for granted.

I grew up in Britain in the 1970s, when many people's expectation of the disabled was that they were in some intrinsic way different from the rest of us. "Different," as in "less." It was only through the tireless campaigning of disabled people, their caretakers, and their advocates, that they came out of the shadows and into the mainstream of day-to-day life. Life *is* still different for them because of the many practical challenges they face, but there are now far fewer people who see them as "less" than their able-bodied counterparts.

From my limited viewpoint up here in Expatland, however, it's hard to tell whether the same attitudinal changes have taken place in Moscow, so it was a great insight to be able to see Open Art's adaptation of Bizet's "Carmen" this week. The performers were passionate about their art, that was easy to see, and the same expectations of excellence were placed upon them as would have been in any amateur dramatic production. It was different, certainly, from a whistles and bells performance that one might see at the Bolshoi Theater or similar, but it was always going to be that way, and the tragic story of Carmen was played out just as clearly, beautifully and sympathetically by the eight performers with Down syndrome through dance, music and mime as it would have been by able-bodied people.

This was no surprise to me — or to any of the other guests at the performance. And one of the key things that Open Art is trying to achieve is that it will be no surprise to anyone else, either.

Open Art will perform an abridged version of "Carmen" at the Asia Pacific Women's Group Charity Bazaar at The Composer's Hall on Saturday, May 28.

Clare Taylor can be contacted at claretaylor@moscow@gmail.com should you wish to offer her paid writing commissions, free chocolate, or to find out more about Open Art Theatre or ARC.

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