

Levanov's 'Gerontophobia' Opens in Winzavod

By [John Freedman](#)

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Levanov sitting on a table in an underground corridor next to the old wine vault where his play is being performed. **John Freedman**

“This is real theater. Not contrived. It happens right here and now, and it will never happen again. I think this is the tendency of contemporary theater.”

The speaker was Vadim Levanov, a playwright from Tolyatti whose latest play “Gerontophobia” opens in a former underground wine vault on the territory of the Winzavod complex of art galleries on Sunday and Monday.

“Gerontophobia” is not Levanov’s Moscow debut — his plays “Gorky Park” and “The Montgolfier Brothers’ Balloon” were produced at Moscow’s Debut Center a decade ago. But until now his biggest success as a writer has been in St. Petersburg, where Valery Fokin staged two of his works.

Levanov, 44, is also famed as the inspiration behind the so-called “Tolyatti phenomenon.” Under his tutelage as artistic director of Tolyatti’s May Readings Festival, Yury Klavdiyev and the brothers Vyacheslav and Mikhail Durnenkov rose to international fame as playwrights.

Levanov traveled to Moscow at the end of May for what he thought was to be the premiere of “Gerontophobia” in a mini-festival known as Spring at Winzavod. This is the doing of Kirill Serebrennikov, one of Moscow’s hottest directors of the last decade.

Spring at Winzavod is offering six new performances through June, five directed by Serebrennikov himself. The odd show out is “Gerontophobia,” which is directed by Zhenya Berkovich, a young woman whose unwavering gaze and measured speech unmistakably indicate a director’s sensibilities.

But when an actress approached Berkovich to congratulate her following the first May performance, Serebrennikov immediately put a stop to that.

“No congratulations!” he cautioned. “This show is still growing. Tonight was no premiere. These are previews!”

Previews or premiere, the show ran to packed houses five days in a row. Two performances were added this weekend before the show reopens in the fall.

Levanov, talking to me last week from Tolyatti by Skype, lays the success at the feet of the director, whom he praises for the loose, even improvisational, approach she took to his text.

“Zhenya offered her own interpretation, she didn’t slavishly follow what I wrote,” Levanov declared. “And I really like that.”

“Gerontophobia” tells the story of a young woman, played by student actor Yana Irtenyeva, who is overcome with a fear and loathing of old age. Her encounters with others — from an old man to a 13-year-old girl — force her to ask herself some hard questions.

For the performance, Berkovich turned the long, narrow wine vault — originally built five years before the abolition of serfdom — into a richly cluttered Soviet apartment room. Sixty audience members sit in single file around the stage perimeter. Actors enter through closets and bookcases.

It is inherent in the play and in Berkovich’s production that we are never entirely sure of what happens with the young woman.

What we know is what we see: a young woman encountering a series of individuals, each of whom lives a profoundly rich life filled with failures, losses, memories, convictions and quirks. Berkovich cast well-known actors in these roles — Galina Morachyova of the Hermitage Theater, Rogvold Sukhoverko from the *Sovremennik*, and independent actress Oksana Mysina.

Levanov admits that his play changed as it transformed into a performance piece. He says the political and social implications of what he wrote were reduced to a minimum. “Zhenya was more interested in the psycho-physical drama of the heroine,” he explained.

Nothing in that process surprised the writer, however, because he worked closely with the director on the text throughout rehearsals. “I wrote new scenes for her,” Levanov says, “and we tossed out several scenes.”

This is an experience that the playwright increasingly incorporates into his work these days. He says he purposefully writes more than is needed because he wants to encourage directors to collaborate with him.

“I know any director is going to cut what I write anyway,” he adds. “That’s the Russian way.”

“Gerontophobia” plays Sunday at 5 p.m. and Monday at 3 p.m. at Winzavod, located at 1 4th Syromyatnichesky Pereulok, Bldg. 6, Gallery Entrance 14. Metro Kurskaya. Tel. 917-4646.
www.winzavod.ru

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