

Yale Playwrights at Moscow's Playwright and Director Center

By [John Freedman](#)

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Moscow has known for three years that Marat Gatsalov is a talent to watch. His productions of "Life is Grand" at Teatr.doc (with Mikhail Ugarov), "Trash" at the Playwright and Director Center, and "Exhibits" for the Prokopyevsk Drama Theater, which won a Critic's Choice Golden Mask award this April, have marked him as a major emerging talent.

But now the United States, or, to be exact, a small group from Yale University's School of Drama, is learning about Gatsalov as well.

Along with fellow director Mikhail Milkis and Russian playwrights Nina Belenitskaya and Marina Krapivina, Gatsalov traveled to New Haven, CT, last October and November to spend a week working at the Yale University School of Drama. They found the experience so rewarding that they returned home with the idea of hosting Yale playwrights and their professors in Moscow.

Gatsalov, who runs a project called Workshop on Begovoi at the Playwright and Director Center, wasted no time putting the plan into action. He enlisted financial help from the Moscow Culture Department, Yevgeny Mironov's Fund for Small Cities, and the U.S. - Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission through the United States embassy in Moscow, and organized a weeklong playwriting workshop for four young playwrights currently studying at Yale.

Young Russian directors who are currently studying at the Moscow Art Theater school and at the Russian Academy of Theater Arts are showing barebones productions of the four plays this weekend after five short days of rehearsals. Amelia Roper's "She Rode Horses Like the Stock Exchange" was presented by director Alexander Sozonov on Saturday evening. The remaining three plays go on display Sunday beginning at 5 p.m.

For those who are interested, admission is free and all comers are welcome. Only make sure you arrive at the Playwright and Director Center early, because all of the events this week, including master classes led by Yale professors David Chambers, Joan Channick and Kenneth Prestininzi, have been packing the house.

The three works that will be shown Sunday are Martha Jane Kaufman's "The Other Grace," Martyna Majok's "The Friendship of Her Thighs," and Meg Miroshnik's "The Fairytale Lives of Russian Girls."

I caught up with Majok late Saturday evening in the foyer of the Playwright and Director Center and asked her to talk about the experience of bringing her work to Russia.

Born in Poland, Majok grew up in Chicago where she attended the University of Chicago. She has written plays in Polish, Spanish and English, and has collaborated with numerous American theaters, including the Satori Group in Seattle, Boston Actors' Theater, Victory Gardens in Chicago and the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

In Moscow Majok has found the "extreme honesty" and "true discourse" that people exhibit during discussions of each others' work to be a breath of fresh air. "In the U.S., out of respect for each others' learning processes, we don't really address things directly," she points out.

Her engagement with Russian theater began last fall when she acted in a staged reading of Krapivina's "The Ides of March" at Yale. There she learned that the relationship between directors and playwrights in the two countries differs drastically. In the United States the writer is an integral part of the rehearsal process, whereas in Russia the writer customarily stands back and turns his or her work over to the production team.

Majok recalls having a talk in New Haven with Belenitskaya, who rarely attended rehearsals of her play, "Pavlik — My God." Belenitskaya explained that "Russian writers like surprises."

In an effort to play the game by the local rules, Majok also stopped in to see just one rehearsal of her play last week. She loved what she saw — "beautiful and talented" actors and a very "sharp" directorial approach, which was what she had in mind when writing the piece — but she admits she is also conflicted about that. "If I were in America and my peers were seeing it, I would be much more involved," she laughs.

While here the group of students from Yale have had various opportunities to catch a glimpse of modern Moscow.

Early in their trip they attended a performance of Kama Ginkas's production of "The Black Monk" at the Theater Yunogo Zritelya. Majok was particularly impressed by the performance of Sergei Makovetsky in the show's lead.

"It's fun to discover other countries' rhythms," she observes. "As I'm learning through the Muscovites in life, so I see it on stage."

Less of interest to Majok has been the Moscow metro.

"I hate the metro here!" she chuckles. "You can't move!"

On the other hand, one must wonder if the Polish-American's judgment is always sound. She also talks about taking a dash across a ten-lane throughway. She did survive, however, which says something about her instincts.

To see and hear much more of what Martyna Majok had to say, click on the image above.

Performances of the remaining three plays take place Sunday at 5, 7 and 9 p.m. at the Playwright and Director Center, located at 5 Begovaya Ulitsa. Metro Begovaya. Admission is free.

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