

Lyubimov vs. the Taganka Redux Ad Nauseam

By [John Freedman](#)

July 10, 2011



The  **Moscow Times**

I just finished translating a funny play by Andrei Metelkov. It is called "Powder Keg" and it tells the story of a family that, literally, shoots first and asks questions later while slinging insults the way short order chefs sling hash.

As I was working I kept thinking, "Why is this so familiar?"

And then as I was walking back to the metro from The Moscow Times offices on Thursday I saw a tabloid in a news kiosk and it dawned on me: Yury Lyubimov! The Taganka Theater!

Look at this exchange in "Powder Keg" after a wife denies that something she said to her husband is idiotic:

HUSBAND. Is too!

WIFE. Is not!

HUSBAND draws his pistol.

HUSBAND. Idiotic!

WIFE pulls her pistol.

WIFE. Is not!

HUSBAND. Is too!

GRANDMA draws her pistol.

I mean, replace "Husband" and "Wife" with "Lyubimov" and "Taganka" and you damn near have a perfect fit. I won't hazard a guess as to who might play the role of Grandma in this situation.

For over two weeks now the conflict leading to Lyubimov's resignation as artistic director from the theater he founded in 1964 has been reported on, and hashed over, on countless television shows; splashed all over the pages of most Russian newspapers; has gone viral on the internet and in social networks; and I'll bet has upped the number of text messages exchanged. Commentators are having a field day putting forth theories for the fight and suggesting remedies to solve it.

Everybody feels the need to take sides. Some have slammed Lyubimov, who is 93, for being arrogant or a "dinosaur" (as did one playwright on Facebook). Others have taken the actors to task for being greedy and ungrateful. Sympathies are running wild, but it's still not certain whose side the majority is coming down on.

I alternately have been bored, infuriated or deeply saddened by the affair. I have known and observed Lyubimov on a professional basis for 24 years, and my respect for him as one of the great cultural figures of our time has never wavered. Nor will it ever waver, may I add.

I have also known many of Lyubimov's actors and it has never been a secret to me that the tensions between the director and his troupe have always been high.

The mercurial Lyubimov has a history of being unhappy with actors. Throughout the current conflict he repeatedly called his troupe lazy, unprofessional and unmotivated. I have heard him make similar accusations for decades. The first time I interviewed him, in 1987 for the Boston Globe, he was embroiled in a battle with the American Repertory Theater, which he claimed was incapable of working on his level. Not surprisingly, he also suggested that the actors the theater offered him were not up to the task.

One is tempted to say that, like many Russian directors, Lyubimov is not a lover of actors. This is true in spite of, or perhaps because of, the fact that he himself worked the first quarter-century of his career as an actor.

I have seen Lyubimov gravely insult performers who helped him create his reputation. At one of the big anniversary bashes that the theater has held every five years since 1999, Lyubimov took the stage with his entire troupe. Standing at the far corner was Alla Demidova, Lyubimov's number one actress for most of the period from the 1970s to the early 1990s. He

paid her no attention. However, when he spied among the audience a Greek actress he had worked with on a few productions in Greece, he called her on stage, embraced her long and warmly, gave her a huge bouquet and introduced her to the audience packed with dignitaries.

Demidova stood stoically at the corner of the stage, completely ignored. I never saw her in the Taganka again.

My point is that choosing sides in these running battles at the Taganka is a sticky business. However gravely the Taganka company may have offended Lyubimov's sensibilities at times, Lyubimov himself will never be confused with an innocent.

Moreover, as many have noted in all aspects of the media, the breakup at the Taganka is also a symptom of problems that Russian theater in general is currently experiencing.

Can Russian theater continue to be dominated by single strong figureheads, such as Lyubimov? Or must power be shared more equitably?

Wars of various sizes broke out at two other Moscow theaters this season. Sergei Artsibashev was driven out as artistic director at the Mayakovsky Theater and Alexander Galibin was removed at the Stanislavsky even as the rebellion at the Taganka gathered steam. Last season an actors' rebellion was fought back by Rimas Tuminas at the Vakhtangov, ironically, the theater where Lyubimov began his professional life.

Obviously the grounds for conflict between actors and directors is not a problem unique to the Taganka.

Radio personality Matvei Ganapolsky [tackled](#) the topic during his Friday program on Echo Moskvy. He admits a director must have the freedom to work with actors who provide him or her with inspiration, but he also points out that actors must have some sort of security.

"Why should a metal worker or a seamstress, a teacher or a driver have [stability] but an actor not?" he asks.

Others are considering this question as well. An organization called the Independent Labor Union of Theater and Film Actors is hosting a roundtable discussion on Monday at the RIA-Novosti building. According to a press release sent out by the organization, some of the topics to be discussed are the absence of laws that would "systematize actors relationships in film and theater," and "the vulnerability of actors before theater administrators, producers and managers."

Interestingly, the union sides with Lyubimov in his conflict with the Taganka actors, [declaring](#) on its website that, "The behavior of the Taganka Theater actors was not entirely proper, and, perhaps, unacceptable."

Clearly, Russian theater has entered a period of transition, if not to say of confusion.

Presumably, none of this will matter to Lyubimov anymore. The Moscow Culture Committee officially accepted his resignation on Wednesday. Both Lyubimov and his wife Katalin have been