

New York's Studio Six Meets Moscow's SounDrama

By [John Freedman](#)

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"I've never been a part of anything like this," Vasanth Santosham told me ten minutes after the applause died down for the premiere on Friday of a show called "Gorod.OK."

"What started out as a very simple satire about human beings became this gigantic metaphor for the history of mankind," the actor explains.

"Gorod.OK," the title of which has connotations of "little town" and "City — OK" and which closes Sunday evening at 7 p.m. at the Meyerhold Center, was drawn from Mikhail Saltykov-Schedrin's "The History of a Town" and Washington Irving's "History of New York." The cast of 16 is split down the middle — eight actors from Moscow's [SounDrama Studio](#) matched against eight actors from [Studio Six](#), a New York company consisting of actors who studied at the Moscow Art Theater school for four years and graduated in 2005.

That experience of studying and working in Russia left its mark on the American actors. They

have "Russian theater in their blood," as Santosham puts it.

"We are not quite New York theater actors," he continues, "but we're not Russian actors. We're constantly trying to find this kind of perfect blend of what we realized is special in the Russian theater... and make it accessible to an American audience."

"Gorod.OK" is a project of the Chekhov International Theater Festival, which continues to run in Moscow through the end of July. It is one of the original productions that festival head Valery Shadrin adds to every running of the Chekhov fest.

The show, directed by Vladimir Pankov, was put together in about five weeks. At first, according to Santosham, the two companies spent ten days in the Russian town of Gorobets, "getting to know each other" as they worked on dance and vocal training. That was followed by an intensive rehearsal process in Moscow at the Dubrovka Theater Center (yes, the one famous for the terrorist attack on the musical "Nord-Ost" in 2002), which ran daily from noon to 10 p.m.

Santosham calls the show "something that is half Russian and half American." When it starts, he says, "all the Americans are on one side, all the Russians are on the other side. There is a river separating us. As the play goes on people start mixing and you see there is good and bad in everyone. Everyone is basically the same."

Aside from a few moments of purposeful linguistic meandering, primarily for the sake of humor, the American actors perform in English with supertitles in Russian above the stage, while the Russian actors perform in Russian.

This is hardly the first time Studio Six has performed in Russia. Aside from their student productions at the Art Theater school, they also performed Adam Rapp's "Finer Noble Gases" for an extended period in Moscow and then again during a festival in St. Petersburg featuring the students of renowned Russian director Kama Ginkas. "Finer Noble Gases" was directed by Robert Olinger, an American who studied under Ginkas.

In New York, Studio Six has produced numerous shows in the years since the company returned home to the United States. Coming up in the fall are productions of Yevgeny Grishkovets' "Winter" and an adaptation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel "The Demons" under the title of "The Itsy Bitsy Spider."

To hear more of Santosham's rap on Studio Six, recorded in a hallway outside the actors' dressing rooms, click on the image above.

"Gorod.OK" plays Sun. at 7 p.m. at the Meyerhold Center, located at 23 Novoslobodskaya Ulitsa. Metro Novoslobodskaya. Tickets available at the door or through the [Chekhov International Theater Festival](#). Tel. 223-9650, 223-9651.

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