

# Russian Theater from a Finnish Point of View

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Few, if any, foreigners have seen Russian theater from the inside in as much detail, and with as much insight, as Helena Meloni. She is currently the founder and manager of Adelfa Agency Oy, which organizes cultural projects between Russia and the European Union, and she was the Director of the Finnish Cultural Institute in St. Petersburg from 2005 to 2008. She has been an editor and a producer and she holds a Master's Degree in Russian philology from Helsinki University.

But it was Meloni's position as the interpreter of choice from the late 1970s through 2003 that put her in such an extraordinary position with Russia's finest theater-makers.

As she tells the story in the accompanying video, she was an inexperienced college girl in 1978 when she was hired to interpret for the great Georgy Tovstonogov on a production he was to do of an Alexander Ostrovsky play at the Finnish National Theater. She was so nervous the night before she began that she was crippled by a migraine headache. Whatever may have

happened over the course of that time spent working with Tovstonogov, she clearly put herself in good stead. Subsequently, whenever Russian directors came to work in Finland, Meloni was the go-to person. Over the years she translated for a veritable who's who of Russian directors — Anatoly Efros, Yury Lyubimov, Lev Dodin, Roman Viktyuk, Valery Fokin and many others.

I have heard directors say that Meloni was no mere interpreter; that, in fact, she was a partner in the creative process. Her instincts, her memory and her understanding of the directors were so good that she could anticipate in advance what a director might be doing in his work with an actor, thus helping to cut through the language barrier almost instantly.

I crossed paths with Meloni last week in Nitra, Slovakia, where we both attended the latest edition of Divadelna Nitra, an annual international theater festival. It so happened that one of the showcase productions was Kama Ginkas' "Medea," which has been in repertoire at Moscow's Theater Yunogo Zritelya for two years. And it also happens that, as Meloni states it, "Kama Ginkas is the love story" of her theatrical life. "He deeply affected my view of life and my way of thinking," she added.

I sat Helena down in front of my camera on the last morning of the festival and asked her to share her thoughts on Ginkas.

She first encountered him 25 years ago when he was "a completely unknown director," who was only able to work rarely in Russia. She had just finished up a gig with Lev Dodin, so, naively ignoring the jealousies and rivalries that often exist among major artists, she called Dodin up to ask his opinion of Ginkas. Dodin paused, she said, and then declared that Ginkas was one of the most interesting directors around. "He is not one of the easiest persons to work with. But knowing you, you will have no trouble," Dodin said.

Thus, Meloni's working relationship with Ginkas began with his dramatization of Anton Chekhov's story "Ward No. 6" in 1987. It continued through Ginkas' fifth Finnish production — Shakespeare's "Macbeth" in 1997. As many observers have noted, this was one of the most productive and fruitful periods in Ginkas' career. He staged "Ward No. 6" as an "unknown" and by the time he completed "Macbeth," he was acknowledged as one of the masters of Russian theater at home, in Finland and throughout the world.

Meloni witnessed that transformation first-hand. "He came to Finland almost as if he were a boy from the country," she said. But she was fascinated to see him grow as an artist and to be so enthusiastic about his work in Finland. Perhaps one of the reasons for that is that Finland, and especially the Swedish-speaking populace in Finland, reminded him of his homeland in the Baltic country of Lithuania.

Dodin's introduction of Ginkas came in handy, however. Ginkas "has a terrible character," Meloni said with an understanding and affectionate laugh. But there is much more to it than that. "He is willing to put 150% into his work and he expects that from all around him."

More often than not, the Finnish actors, crews and stage hands shared Ginkas' commitment to his art and this forged a deep relationship among them. During Ginkas' Finnish years the director "began to believe that theater is a collective way of doing art. In Finland, he began believing in people around him. It gave him the peace to concentrate on what he wanted

to say," Meloni opined.

To hear and see these and many more fascinating comments – including Meloni's description of Ostrovsky as the "Russian Shakespeare," and her assessment of the Divadelna Nitra festival – click on the image above.

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