

Shakespeare in Saratov

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The Saratov Youth Theater has significant experience ferreting out new talent. Over the last few years it has organized and hosted numerous workshops that have helped introduce Russia to plays by such important contemporary writers as Yaroslava Pulinovich of Yekaterinburg and Dorota Maslowska from Poland. These events have also given emerging directors the opportunity to try out things they might not have been able to do otherwise. The Moscow-based German director Georg Genoux has worked here in the past, as has the St. Petersburg director and playwright Dmitry Yegorov.

But never had the theater hosted a workshop like the one that wrapped up last week. Titled simply "The Shakespeare Festival," it was a three-day marathon of six staged readings of Shakespeare plays — some of them going quite far afield from the original.

The festival was the brainchild of Moscow's preeminent Shakespeare scholar Alexei Bartoshevich and Oleg Loevsky, who, simply though inadequately put, is Russia's living encyclopedia of all things theater. The idea, as both men described in various ways over the course of the festival, was to put young directors and actors together with Shakespeare's

texts and to see what would come of the collisions.

Most of the showings were prepared in the extraordinarily short period of three to four days, meaning that the directing, as well as the acting, was fast, loose and energetic. Three of the directors (Polina Struzhkova, Yelena Nevezhina and Dmitry Volkostrellov) were from Russia, two (Yann-Joel Collin and Razerka Ben Sadia-Lavant) were from France, and one (Andreas Merz) was from Germany. It was a veritable cultural stew filled with surprises.

Perhaps the greatest impression I took away with me was that of the audience. The halls were packed for every performance. There were hordes of students and large numbers of professional-looking spectators, all of whom took active part in the discussions that followed each reading. Whatever one may have thought of the success or failures of the showings, it was obvious that the city is hungry for theater and that its populace always has an opinion about whatever it encounters. One can only conclude that these series of workshops at the Saratov Youth Theater — of which the Shakespeare Festival was the seventh — have done an extraordinary job of attracting and educating new spectators.

Alongside interpretations of "The Two Gentlemen from Verona," "Twelfth Night," "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and "Othello," I thought two readings stood out especially — Dmitry Volkostrellov's "To Be or Not to Be? There is No Question" and Andreas Merz' "Titus Andronicus." The former was a modern riff on the notion of Shakespeare's most famous monologue, while the latter was a radical take on Shakespeare's bloodiest play that was a mix of farce, grotesque and comics.

Merz' actors squealed like children, played with masks, splattered tomato-juice blood all over themselves, sang like karaoke stars, cooked up real salads and pancakes, and hopped around like bunny rabbits in the telling of the tale of a ruthless king and the vengeance his top general takes on him for his murderous cruelty. The result was a jarring and often rudely funny parody of corrupt, two-faced, power-hungry individuals. For the most part the perfidy of Shakespeare's play was turned upside down and mocked by the director and his actors, although a remarkably straightforward performance of Titus by Valery Yemelyanov never allowed the sense of horror to be lost entirely. It was a tight-rope walk of a show that left some spectators furious, others confused and others quite enthusiastic.

Volkostrellov, one of the most interesting young directors to emerge from St. Petersburg in the last decade, put together a fascinating contemporary look at one of the key aspects of "Hamlet" — that moment when the Danish prince first contemplates suicide.

But this was not the director's own interpretation of Shakespeare's text — it was, rather, a compendium of interpretations offered by a random selection of ideas drawn from the internet and from young residents living in Saratov. The director and his team put together their own narrative indicating what some young people know of, and think about, the famous "to-be-or-not-to-be" speech. Does it mean anything to them? Does it have relevance to their lives?

These various statements were woven into a text delivered by four actors dressed in black who stood motionless on an empty black stage. At various times behind them various images of computer screens, cityscapes or scenes out of famous films of "Hamlet" were projected

on the back wall.

Perhaps predictably, the contemporary ruminations on thoughts of life and death drifted into banalities, consumer concerns, indifference and misunderstanding. None of that made the performance itself any less compelling, for this emerged as a true example of bringing new life to an old text.

To view a selection of images from the festival, browse the photo gallery above.

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