

A Critic's Back Pages, Part Four

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Three times this season — which marks the 20th year since The Moscow Times and I have covered the distinctly fascinating topic of Russian theater — I have used this space to peruse my back pages as a critic. I thought I would do this more often when I started in September, but, as that pithy Russian phrase has it, "Man plans. God disposes."

Be that as it may, I again pulled out that yellow envelope holding clippings of my earliest articles for The Moscow Times. And once again I was horrified as I ran through an inordinate number of badly written, well-intentioned reviews, previews, features and news stories.

Then I hit one that sent me reeling. It was an interview piece.

I hate doing interviews. I don't think there's anything I hate doing as much as an interview. I'd rather go to the grocery store than do an interview. And, believe me, I will do anything to avoid going to a grocery store. Ask my wife.

The notion that one person can gain some sort of "inner view" of another person by asking questions — be they intelligent or ignorant — is, in my view, highly debatable. I've lived with

my wife for 23 years and I haven't the vaguest notion what she's about. How am I going to get inside a stranger's head with a few questions?

I've never been a celebrity stalker. I don't like that industry. Friends and family know I will rail at it without the slightest drop of provocation. I love mystery. I love leaving the work to the artist and leaving the work of interpretation to myself.

But, as they say, man plans. God — or, in the newspaper business, your editor — disposes.

Meg Bortin was editor-in-chief at The Moscow Times in January of 1993. She called me into her office and said she wanted me to interview the great Russian film actress Nonna Mordyukova. Now. For the next issue. Going to press in, what, a couple hours? Meg had seen something about a British organization naming Mordyukova one of the world's 10 best actresses. She wanted a follow-up in the MT.

You're the arts guy, you do it.

Ugh.

One thing I love about Russia is that the six degrees of separation here is two. I once spent two years getting in touch with Al Pacino. I reached Nonna Mordyukova, who was probably better loved in Russia than Pacino ever will be in the United States, in a matter of minutes.

She picked up the phone and barked "Hello" at me. I flinched but soldiered on. I told her my name, the name of my newspaper and why I was calling. Mordyukova was not impressed, but with a toxic sigh of resignation she asked when I could come meet her. After a moment of hemming and hawing, I explained I was on deadline and needed to talk to her now. Right now. This very minute. On the phone. I cringe now to write these words for I can still feel, see, hear and maybe even smell myself cringing as I cradled the phone receiver between my ear and shoulder that day in late January.

"You mean you don't even want to meet me?" she asked incredulously. "How can you possibly learn anything about someone over the telephone?!" I may have mumbled something about how I would love to meet her some day. What follows is the entire remainder of our conversation: "I am over-interviewed. Whatever you need to know you can find in books. I suggest you don't write your article."

Mordyukova said that and hung up the phone.

Oh, lovely. Meg's going to love this, I thought, my hands still shaking as they are now, too, while I put myself through the torture of remembering it. Even worse, my wife, an actress who worships the ground Mordyukova walks on, is going to hate me forever when she hears I have been harassing her idol.

But, if you've ever written for a newspaper, you know that a furious star or an angry spouse is nothing compared to a disappointed editor. Editors must be appeased at all costs and regardless of reason. It's just written like that in some book somewhere: Thou shalt appease thy editor.

And so I wrote the "interview" article Meg Bortin wanted. I have no idea where I got

the quotes I used in it. This was long before the Internet and our office "library" consisted of a few newspapers and magazines. I quoted something Mordyukova said on television on the Vesti news program, although I have no idea where I got it from. For the record, here's what she told them: "I haven't done anything for 10 years. I am a very lonely person."

I did what Mordyukova told me to. I went to the encyclopedias we had on hand and I cobbled together a non-article based on a non-interview with a woman who had no interest in this piece by an author who had none either, but who was writing for an editor who, one assumed, wanted nothing more than to see this piece in print.

Still, a story emerged. It was a heart-rending tale with particular resonance in Russia — that of a talented, beloved actress who finds herself over the years being ignored by her peers and her profession. The list is long enough to make anyone familiar with Russian film or theater read and weep. We can mention Faina Ranevskaya, Rina Zelyonaya, Maria Babanova and Alexandra Khokhlova for starters. You don't know them? My point is made. Mordyukova, whose greatness no one will ever question, was yet another in a stellar group of major but seriously underappreciated talents.

Thanks to help from Yekaterina Turchina, who has compiled The Moscow Times' weekly calendar of cultural events for its entire 20 years, I called the celebrated film scholar Rostislav Yurenyev, who put Mordyukova's career into perspective. "After her spectacular debut," he said of her star turn in the classic film "The Young Guard" in 1948, "we could have expected that she would be offered a huge number of roles. But unfortunately, it didn't happen."

On this topic I again quoted Mordyukova's brusque comments in Vesti. "I could have done a hundred times more than I did, but nobody needed me," she said.

And here I was pouring salt on her life-long wounds with my silly questions. As if I think she's going to be happy that someone in England called her one of the greats. And I'm writing an article that, come hell or high water, will be published January 28, 1993, under the dubious headline of "Nonna Gets Recognition At Last." What's that supposed to mean? Whose idea is that of sadistic cruelty?

As I say, I hate doing interviews. I have done a lot. I have interviewed a who's who of Russian theater and cinema, including Yury Lyubimov, Lev Dodin, Kama Ginkas, Pyotr Fomenko, Andrei Konchalovsky, Sergei Mikhalkov, Andrei Eshpai and, I might add, Rina Zelyonaya. None went as badly, or taught me as much, as my "talk" with Nonna Mordyukova. Never since have I forgotten that you never interview a celebrity; you either interact — or you don't — with a human being. Forget that and you've forgotten everything there is to know.

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