

Remembering a Man of the Theater

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Yury Gorsky is not a name a Moscow theater-goer would necessarily know. But he had a face, an expression, a warmth and an enthusiasm that no one who ever encountered him will forget.

And most people who know Moscow theater had encountered Yury Gorsky.

Gorsky came to Anatoly Vasilyev's School of Dramatic Art approximately 20 years ago. He took over as the head administrator and remained in that position until his death May 1 in a car accident. He was on his way home from the airport in a taxi. He was, to my best ability to calculate, 58, perhaps 59, years old.

I first remember Gorsky as the well-dressed man who stood at the entrance to Vasilyev's theater on Povarskaya Ulitsa. There was something almost exaggeratedly proper about him. He was a man who exuded dignity and warmth at the same time. I did not know him at the time, but he already knew me. He always welcomed me with a tight smile, a curt hello and bit of a nod of the head. There was nothing special in this. He greeted everyone that way,

as though he knew them all. He probably did.

The mix in Gorsky's manner of formality and informality was so unusual it could not go unnoticed. Surely that is one of the reasons that Vasilyev put him into the position of being the public face of the theater. When you stepped through the plexiglass door and headed down the stairs to the main stage at the theater on Povarskaya, you had the sense that you had entered a place that demanded, and deserved, your respect. This was due in no small measure to the effect Gorsky had on you as you passed him by at the entrance.

This is not a trifle in theater; the ability to affect a spectator's frame of mind right at the entrance. It is something you would entirely expect from a master of detail like Vasilyev. But what Gorsky brought to his job was entirely his own. There surely was not another administrator in Moscow theater who could come close to Gorsky's commitment, and the effect he had on people.

But this is only the beginning of the tale.

Gorsky underwent an extraordinary transformation when Vasilyev was forced out of his theater in 2006. Always quiet and reserved in his own dignified and courteous way, Gorsky suddenly became an extrovert. His proper smile was replaced with a large, wide, open grin that brightened his entire face. When I would arrive at the theater — whether it was the venue on Povarskaya or the new building on Sretenka — Gorsky would step toward me smartly, smiling, welcoming me by name — "I'm so happy to see you again, John!" — and shaking my hand vigorously.

It was as though I was the only person that Gorsky — and by extension, the theater — really wished to have in attendance that evening. At least until the next person walked in the door and he greeted them the same way.

Then there was the shock — I feel comfortable using that word — that came when Gorsky began making the ritual request for spectators to turn off their cell phones just before curtain time.

He virtually chanted the words — "no photos, no recordings, please turn off your cell phones" — as though it were a mantra. His voice hung just below a shout. He played on all the rhythms that the structure of the Russian words would allow. This was not an announcement, it was a performance. And it ended, as all good performances do, with a flourish. He slammed home his message with a forceful, staccato, almost aggressive, shout of "thank you" — "spa-SI-bo!!!" — that cannot be rendered faithfully in writing with less than three exclamation points. Five might do it better.

The first time I heard Gorsky deliver this message the hall burst into laughter and then applause. I think many thought it was a joke. It was not. It was the beginning of a tradition. The next time I visited the School of Dramatic Art the same thing happened again. By now the audience was laughing less and applauding more.

Over the years, Gorsky's announcement became a theatrical event in its own right. You could hear the crowd begin to buzz even as he prepared to walk out on stage to deliver his message. They knew what was coming, they responded to it in advance, and they applauded vigorously

each time Gorsky barked out that marvelously indescribable "spa-SI-bo!!!"

There was something in Gorsky's transformation that said: "Vasilyev is gone. The School of Dramatic Art is dead. Long live the School of Dramatic Art."

Gorsky's new manner, his emergence from the shadows, if you will, was a signal of change. Things now were going to be different. We knew that anyway. Vasilyev, after a long and nasty battle with the city authorities, had lost. He left his theater and went abroad. The School of Dramatic Art would never be the same. And suddenly here was the theater's chief administrator coming forward and letting the public know that there was still life and there was still dignity in this place.

Believe me, I am not exaggerating. Artistically, the theater struggled in the immediate aftermath of Vasilyev's departure. It could not have been any other way. It was too violent a break. So while the creative artists at the theater struggled to find a path forward, it was Yury Gorsky who stepped up and showed everyone that this theater was still alive. Appearances may not be everything in art, but they count for an awful lot. Gorsky gave the appearance of a healthy theater, thus helping it to heal its wounds.

So prominent was Gorsky's presence in the new School of Dramatic Art that Dmitry Krymov even cast him in his latest production, "Gorki-10." Gorsky had several walk-on parts during transitions, essentially playing himself. At the premiere, the conclusion of his first scene was even greeted with applause.

That was a sign of this man's impact on the theater where he worked. What other administrator playing a bit part in a show is going to compel spectators to applaud? It is unthinkable. Just as it is unthinkable that the next time I attend a performance at the theater I will not be greeted by Yury Gorsky.

For me personally, Yury Gorsky's death marks the end of still another era at the School of Dramatic Art.

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