

What I Didn't Do for Kama Ginkas' Production of "Nocturne"

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Maksym Kurochkin and Kama Ginkas chat following a dress rehearsal of Adam Rapp's "Nocturne" at the Young Spectator Theater. **John Freedman**

My contributions were slim to none.

For example, I had a great opportunity to do something useful during a dress rehearsal of Kama Ginkas' new production of Adam Rapp's "Nocturne" at the Young Spectator Theater last week. Fate put me in the position of potentially possessing the power to shield the actors from a hostile force of nature — a young woman wracked with guttural coughs brought on by the latest virus stalking Moscow's streets.

Ginkas mounted an eerily beautiful, quiet, and quietly intense rendition of Rapp's tragic tale of a family ripped apart by a fatal accident. The more quiet and intense the performance grew, the more the girl sitting next to me hacked and choked and coughed her poor little heart out.

I tried my best to keep her supplied with cough drops, but it was to no avail. It was as though I wasn't there at all.

That is also rather how I feel about my role as one of the translators of the play — as if I wasn't there at all. Maksym Kurochkin, now — Holy Moses! as my father used to say — what a job he did!

I enlisted Max to work with me on a translation of this play well over a year ago as part of a project I was (and am still) involved in called New American Plays for Russia. It was funded by the U.S. Embassy in Moscow as part of the Bilateral Presidential Commission and its American Seasons program. I say none of this in an attempt to impress anyone in any way, but rather it offers me the chance to express gratitude where gratitude is due, and to grant anyone who wishes it the full right to sling mud my way. Yes. That's right. I am biased. If you don't trust a word I say here, doubt away to your heart's content!

Maksym Kurochkin. One of the most accomplished, innovative, intelligent, witty and talented writers Russia has put forth in the last decade and a half. I've written about him plenty. I've worked with him several times, usually translating his plays into English.

But here I found myself in a completely new symbiosis. Holding before us Adam Rapp's fragile yet scorching text, we poked around in its nooks and crannies, looking for ways to make it spring to life in Russian. I offered Max various possibilities for each phrase, explained double entendres, and described where Rapp was playing with conventions, undermining them or blowing them out of the water. Once we got through the entire text — it took us numerous sessions of two to three hours at a time — Max took the mess we had accrued and, rather like a jealous dog with a bone, disappeared into the confines of his private work space where I lost touch with him for some time.

Two months later, voila! I received by e-mail a text that made me gasp with its beautiful rhythms, its linguistic music, its wit, its inventiveness and, not least of all, its sensitivity to Rapp's original. Adam Rapp was all over this translation — it was his play, his monologue casting challenges at men and God alike. It was also very much Kurochkin, it had the substance, the control and the playfulness that always mark his work.

There wasn't the slightest hint left that I ever had anything to do with it. That is what a great job Max did of forging a Russian text that does not rise up from Rapp's play like a stencil, but rather stands alongside it with the same pride, the same swagger and the same vulnerability.

Kama Ginkas. One of the greatest directors Russia has produced in the last half-century. An utterly unique talent whose art draws its power from integrity, truth, courage, wisdom, a wicked sense of humor and a professional craftsmanship that is tuned to mouth-watering perfection.

I have worked with Kama, too, often for months or even years. When, to my amazement, he told me in September that he had begun rehearsing "Nocturne," I think I muttered something silly, like, "If I can be of assistance, don't hesitate to call."

Kama, who is 71 and has staged half-a-hundred shows all over the world in his 45-year career, chuckled. "I'm pretty used to solving my own problems," he said.

Yep. And what solutions he came up with in his interpretation of "Nocturne"!

The watermelon and the baseball bat, the mannequins, the grand piano crunching through a Formica wall — well, Ginkas does that kind of stuff in his sleep. Not that it won't make your heart skip two beats. But that is the director mining the rich ore of his professional experience and his personal theatrical vocabulary.

No, the surprises are elsewhere — in the half-toned intonations of the actors' speech, the quiet, subtle dynamic of the performance advancing almost imperceptibly like a beautiful and threatening storm cloud, the syncopated turns from light, childlike joy to crushing adult despair and hard-won spiritual absolution. Surely this is the most understated piece of theater I have seen Ginkas produce. As harsh as the story that "Nocturne" tells, I twice found myself wishing — during the dress rehearsal and again at Friday's opener — that this exquisite piece of theater would never end.

My only regret is that I cannot review this extraordinary show. "Ethical reasons." "Conflict of interest." "Journalistic integrity" and the like.

Even though I can't find a trace anywhere of my own participation in this show, I won't get to have my say about it. I think that's a crying shame. There is so much I could have said.

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