

The Political World of Moscow Theater

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Bob Dylan said it way back in 1989, in a [song](#) called "Political World":

We live in a political world
Wisdom is thrown into jail
It rots in a cell, is misguided as hell
Leaving no one to pick up a trail

The song as a whole sounds like a brief of recent developments in Moscow cultural life.

Moscow's biggest political protest in some time took place on Sunday, gathering anywhere between 9,500 (the official count of Moscow authorities) and over 100,000 people (the count of some opposition leaders). As has been true in the past, the crowds were stirred to action in part by many of Russia's leading cultural figures.

Over the past week journalist Sasha Sotnik and his Politvestnik organization recorded short videos showing famous actors, directors and writers encouraging the public to participate

in the march, which protested the passing by Russian parliament of the so-called Dima Yakovlev, or "anti-Magnitsky" act, banning the adoption of Russian children by Americans. Over a period of just a few days, video statements by film director Eldar Ryazanov and actress Lia Akhedzhakova were viewed over 120,000 times.

But just four days before the march there was another event, attracting a standing-room only crowd of 100 that I found equally significant. This was the latest installment of an ongoing project conducted by director Varvara Faer at Teatr.doc. Titled "Theater of Witnesses. Pussy Riot," it is a mix of theater, film, journalism and reality show crammed into a single event, whose purpose is to keep attention focused on the plight of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, the two women sentenced last year to two years in prison for their "punk rock" protest against President Vladimir Putin at Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral.

Faer mounts these evenings from time to time, inviting as participants activists who are close to Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina. On Wednesday Tolokonnikova's father and Alyokhina's mother were in attendance, although they did not participate. Most of what could be called a theatricalized press conference focused on Yekaterina Samutsevich, a Pussy Riot member whose conviction was overturned in October, and Taisia Krugovykh, an activist, video artist and friend of the Pussy Riot members.

Krugovykh, who often travels to visit Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina in prison, showed video footage of the penal colonies, and described her experiences with the authorities and the prisoners.

When visiting Tolokonnikova in her prison in Mordovia, Krugovykh "was not allowed to touch her for fear that I might pass her drugs," she explained with a dry laugh.

"There is nothing in these towns," she declared as seemingly endless footage of a cement wall topped by curled barbed wire ran on a makeshift screen. "Just people working at the prisons. You can drive two hours and see nothing but walls."

Alyokhina is allowed to watch video films in her isolation cell in the prison at Berezniki in Perm Krai, said Krugovykh, although the authorities confiscated a film by Jean-Luc Godard because it contained scenes of nudity. "She can't watch films with nudity or about rebellion, revolution or escape from prison," the activist said.

She also noted that Fyodor Dostoevsky's classic novel "Crime and Punishment" was removed from the prison library because it contains "extremism" — the murder of a pawnbroker by the main character.

Samutsevich took the stage to describe a Pussy Riot protest action that caught the particular attention of Vladimir Putin in an [interview](#) he gave to Russia Today television channel. Putin declares that a "couple of years ago" the group hung effigies at a supermarket bearing slogans such as "free Moscow of Jews, gays and gastarbeiters," and suggests that authorities should have taken action against them back then.

It was one of the evening's most interesting moments as it illustrated well the difference between having, and almost having, a command of the facts.

As Samutsevich described it, the event took place not a "pair of years ago," but four years ago. There were no effigies hung, but rather live activists played the parts of bodies hung to death. There were no calls to "free Moscow of Jews," although one of the activists, known as Seroye Fioletovoye, is Jewish. Finally the slogans berating gays and gastarbeiters were not put forth by the protesters at all, but were included in a larger protest action calling attention to nationalist youth groups who, indeed, often put out calls of this nature.

In short, as Samutsevich pointed out, Putin was almost right about everything he said on the topic, but, in fact, was wrong on every single point of his commentary.

The second half of the "performance" consisted of Faer conducting a sort of pop interview, during which friends of Tolokonnikova, Alyokhina and Samutsevich were asked to describe the women for the general public. She asked participants to rate the women's intellectual capacity, their talents, their leadership qualities and their sex life. This both mocked the notion of making political activists into pop stars, while also providing useful and interesting information that revealed the human side of these women who have been thrust into the role of public political figures and famous convicts.

It was an often moving, chilling and funny evening. For someone like myself, who came of age reading the Gulag literature of Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov, it was a distressing reminder of how some things have not changed in Russia. And yet the fact that the performance took place at all clearly suggests that there are individuals committed to not letting the present slip into the past.

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