

Golden Mask Shows St. Petersburg Theater on the Rise

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There was plenty of talk when the nominations for this year's Golden Mask awards were announced and St. Petersburg's Lev Dodin was nowhere to be found among them.

Dodin, the master of the Maly Drama Theater — known in the West affectionately as "the Maly" — is a perennial nominee and almost a perennial winner. He has been the standard-bearer for theatrical excellence in St. Petersburg since the late 1980s and he still is that, make no mistake.

But things have changed, make no mistake about that either. That became quite clear to me on Thursday and Friday. In the course of those two days I saw three shows from St. Petersburg, each very different, each a huge success if taken on its own terms.

But let's get one messy detail out of the way before we expand upon that.

The day is long gone when an actor or director worked with a "home" company and rarely strayed. So when we talk "St. Petersburg productions," we're also talking about some pretty important Moscow talent. Just as some significant St. Petersburg talent has begun to call Moscow at least a home-away-from-home — consider the movie star Konstantin Khabensky at the Moscow Art Theater or the director Yury Butusov working at the Satirikon, the Art Theater and the Pushkin Theater.

As such, some of the St. Petersburg shows at the Golden Mask have a Moscow stamp. The Alexandrinsky's scintillating "Hedda Gabler" was staged by Moscow's Kama Ginkas. (Although Ginkas attended theater institute in Leningrad in the 1960s and worked there sporadically in the 1970s.) "Lear," a production of the Priyut Komedianta, was staged by Konstantin Bogomolov, who was born, bred and began his career in Moscow. Even Mikhail Patlasov, who directed "Antibodies" for Baltiisky Dom, spent a few years studying in Moscow after beginning his career in Perm, but before moving to St. Petersburg.

The point is that I am not referring to a "purely" St. Petersburg kind of theater art. But the fact remains: in two days I saw three highly innovative shows that originated in the city on the Neva River.

The first I saw was Dmitry Volkostrellov's staging of Pavel Pryazhko's "Haughty Girl," produced by the Bryantsev Theater Yunogo Zritelya and Post Theater. Born in Moscow 30 years ago, Volkostrellov studied in St. Petersburg with Dodin and founded his Post Theater there a few years ago, although, let's note, he was born in Moscow and he told me Thursday that he now is spending most of his time here.

Volkostrellov has earned a strong following (while baffling some) with a distinctive style that seems to take the notion of "realism" to extremes. His actors move around the stage, sometimes talking to themselves, sometimes busying themselves silently with tasks the audience has no way of understanding. If I had to find comparisons to make the point I might compare his works to the paintings of Edward Hopper, say, or to the way we perceive what fish are up to in an aquarium.

Most of the time in recent years Volkostrellov has worked with the texts of Pavel Pryazhko, a Minsk-based writer whose plays originally appeared in Moscow thanks to Teatr.doc, and who increasingly seems to be seeking ways to break down the theatrical and dramatic process in new ways.

Pryazhko's "The Soldier," for example, consists of two sentences and Volkostrellov's production takes 15 minutes to perform. Yet it is more fully defined than most new plays I see produced. Another recent collaboration between the two was "I Am Free" — wherein Volkostrellov stood in front of an audience showing 90 minutes of bleak slides "organized" dramaturgically by Pryazhko. When I saw this performance in September it really angered most people in the hall. Volkostrellov, who constantly wears an almost imperceptible grin on his lips, never changed expressions once as people shouted at him and he continued to click his computer to bring up the next slide.

By comparison, "Haughty Girl" might seem a traditional play — although it is nothing of the sort. There is almost no dialogue. Most of the text is prose description or narration with a few monologues tossed in. Volkostrellov's actors lounge on stage, go to bed, sleep, fix coffee,

watch movies on their computers, swim in swimming pools and stand jumping up and down in the cold. Rarely do they actually do what the words of the play say, so there is usually a gap in what we perceive. It works a little bit like stereo, I guess, whereby our brains are given two sets of information simultaneously — what we see and what we hear. It's up to us to make of it what we will.

I found the show to be a brilliant and incisive portrait of a generation.

One hour after the conclusion of "Haughty Girl," with its highly stylized, super-clean visual lines, I found myself staring at the wildly chaotic set for Patlasov's production of "Antibodies." This is a piece of documentary theater, based on interviews with people involved in one way or another in the 2005 murder of a young antifascist in St. Petersburg. In well edited snippets we hear from the mothers of the killer and the victim, from the victim's girlfriend, from a security guard who watched the event occur, from one of the killer's fascist friends and from the police investigator.

The story is harrowing and, what is more, the production is too.

That is a tremendous achievement. If I have a complaint with documentary drama as we usually see it — and, boy, do I ever — it is that the shows we see are often weaker and less involving than the burning topics they take on. After attending documentary productions about murder and mayhem I often leave the theater grateful that someone is taking on these controversial topics, but underwhelmed by the theatrical experience. At worst, this does legitimate social or political topics a great injustice by making them seem banal.

"Antibodies" raises the level of its performance to match the drama and horror of its topic. It's the kind of show that leaves an audience stunned. Questions of whether you "like" what you saw or not are beside the point. The show does what it intends to — make you feel that suffering, anger and helplessness that destroyed (or did not destroy) the lives of those affected by a senseless murder.

The set designed by Valentina Serebrennikova is brilliant (although she is inexplicably not nominated for a Golden Mask award). It uses a multitude of surfaces — doors, walls, glass panes, human bodies and such — on which to project light or video projections fed from two live cameras stalking the stage with the actors. The juxtaposition of close-ups, long shots and mirrored effects conceived by video designer Yelena Anisimova either expands the significance of the images we see, or breaks down our sense of visual unity, depending upon the device being used at any given moment.

As for the acting, it is arguably the finest I have ever seen in a Russian docudrama. There isn't a wisp of overacting. Yet the connection between each performer and his/her character is so deep that it leaves a profound impression on us. It's no coincidence that Olga Belinskaya is nominated for Best Actress. She is superb in the devastating role of the killer's mother.

Friday I took in Bogomolov's "Lear." Bogomolov has become something of the bete noir of Russian theater lately, his kitsch-laden, inventive, poetic and pop-oriented shows garnering him huge groups of fans and detractors.

"Lear," as the title suggests, is less than Shakespeare's "King Lear" — but it is also much

more. This garish, in-your-face production is a mostly comic riff on the theme of the tragedy. It is set in the Moscow Kremlin before and during World War II, with a few scenes moving to an insane asylum and the front line of military action. Most characters bear Russian or Russianized names and General Secretary Lear, if I may put it that way, is a foul-mouthed, enigmatic character whose behavior changes little, regardless of whether he is in full charge or himself is in the charge of psychiatrists.

The text includes bits of Shakespeare, Varlam Shalamov, Paul Celan, Friedrich Nietzsche (his Zarathustra is a character in the play) and others. In all cases men play female characters, women play male characters.

It is a violent, crazy, irreverent portrayal of the way dictatorial power consumes everyone who touches it. The twist here, however, is that dictators and their sycophants never die. They just get up from their bloody spots on the floor and carry on dictating and scheming.

Bogomolov created a comic-book version of Shakespeare's story (not play), that yanks it into the modern world. His version of Lear-as-Stalin is on no way time specific. This cold, reptilian, zombie-like dictator is a dictator for all seasons.

I hesitate to draw any far-reaching conclusions based on this trio of shows. Twelve, 14 years ago St. Petersburg seemed poised to make a huge leap forward, as several young directors began making very impressive, important work. But that kind of petered out, if you'll pardon the sour pun.

As such, I'll avoid making any grand predictions. But I do want to say: St. Petersburg theaters have provided me with the most rewarding hours I have spent so far at this year's Golden Mask Festival.

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