

Radical Changes in Moscow Theater

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My grandmother used to say of small towns, "Blink and you'll miss it."

That's rather what I think about the changes hitting Moscow theater of late. Close your eyes. Open them again. Take a look. What you see will be different from what you saw a few moments ago.

The biggest news occurred Monday with the appointment of Boris Yukhananov and Klim to run the Stanislavsky Drama Theater and the Playwright and Director Center, respectively. I'll get to that in a minute. But these two huge events are part of a larger context.

On Wednesday Kirill Serebrennikov, the artistic director of the Gogol Center, posted an ominous text on his Facebook page. He was summoned by the police to testify in an investigation into his production of Martin McDonagh's "The Pillowman," staged six years ago at the Moscow Art Theater. Serebrennikov doesn't say it, but he doesn't need to: This is in connection with new laws governing children, violence and art.

Serebrennikov provided something looking like a transcript of the discussion with the investigator. Here is one question followed by the director's answer:

"What is the concept (idea) of the production?"

"Humanism. The artist is always a hindrance to a police state. Children should not suffer. Bastards must be punished. When state tyranny reigns, [the state] will collapse. Bastards always hide behind concerns about children. Totalitarianism is evil."

Now, I wasn't there. I don't know how accurate this quote is. But imagine it being even half as effective and it is still a remarkable exchange.

Serebrennikov more than hints that he was asked to testify as the result of a personal vendetta of a government employee who does not like him or his art. If so, that does not soften the menacing nature of the incident.

Is this an isolated occurrence? Is it the beginning of state harassment of theater artists?

With that loaded question hanging in the air, I return to the hottest topic in Moscow theater this week, the makeovers of the Stanislavsky and the Playwright and Director Center.

Yukhananov, who is 55, and the director/playwright who goes by the name Klim, who is 60, are legendary figures in this town. Graduates of the acting and directing course run by Anatoly Vasilyev and Anatoly Efros at GITIS in the 1980s, they have been experimenters their entire careers. Both have essentially been homeless in a professional sense.

Yukhananov ran a laboratory at Vasilyev's School of Dramatic Art for many years, but his work was rarely shown publicly. One exception was the brilliant "Tale of an Upstanding Man" in 2002. In the last few years he has run MIR-4, his own experimental studio and school located in the Artplay complex east of the Kursk train station.

Klim, a native of Ukraine, has virtually been absent from Moscow since going to St. Petersburg in the mid-1990s to stage several highly acclaimed works. Before that he established his reputation as an iconoclast and brilliant artist with his own short-lived Moscow studio. Since ceasing to work in St. Petersburg in the early 2000s, he primarily lived, taught and wrote in Kiev. Many of his challenging plays — he actually rejects that description and calls them "texts for theater" — have been produced throughout Russia.

Over the last year, however, Klim again burst onto the scene in Moscow. A high-profile 60th birthday celebration at the Meyerhold Center in December 2012 announced he was back. He has taught in various places throughout the year, primarily at the Meyerhold Center's School of Theater Leaders.

For both Klim and Yukhananov this will be a first experience running a repertory house.

Both came to this transitional moment by way of a new approach to management searches instituted by the Moscow Culture Committee. Contracts with current artistic directors Valery Belyakovich at the Stanislavsky, and Mikhail Ugarov at the Playwright and Director Center, were due to expire at season's end, and the Culture Committee opened a competition to fill the positions.

Fifteen applications of individuals or groups laying out their vision for a successful theater organization were received from May 21 to June 10. There were eight applicants for the Stanislavsky and seven for the Playwright and Director Center. The present artistic directors at both venues participated in the process. Applications were sent to a select group of theater experts who narrowed the field then made recommendations. The final choice was made by the Culture Committee.

There is no getting around one enormous problem facing both new theater heads. Each organization has been in turmoil, suffering numerous management changes in recent times. There will surely be opposition to the changes from within each institution.

But having noted the seriousness of this potential obstacle, let's not get ahead of ourselves. Right now these two artists and these two theaters have the extraordinary opportunity to strike out in new directions.

After the announcement of the appointments, Yukhananov was overheard to say, "I am ready for this. I'm ready to take on a theater."

His highly aesthetic, often challenging, style that combines meticulous staging with improvisational acting is vastly different from anything the Stanislavsky has ever encountered. For that very reason, one must assume, it is a fascinating choice. Here is a theater that has tried seven or eight artistic directors over the last dozen years, none lasting more than two years, none doing anything but mark time, regardless of admirable intentions.

Some shows have been better than others, some less. But the fact remains: the Stanislavsky has been in a dreadful rut. One could argue that there has not been a genuine event at this house since Vladimir Mirzoyev's production of "Khlestakov" in 1996.

At the Playwright and Director Center Klim enters a house that lost its rudder when founder Alexei Kazantsev died in 2007. For several years it continued to exist with some success by maintaining Kazantsev's original course of seeking out new writers and developing young directors and actors. However, when Ugarov, the innovative co-founder of the powerful Teatr.doc, was named artistic director two years ago, problems began mounting.

This has been a theater that focused on contemporary work, usually with a strong social message. Klim, a writer and director of great philosophical depth who usually works with the classics, is likely to turn the venue's repertoire in a new direction.

It is hard to overestimate the potential impact these appointments may have. If they are successful, they will join several other revitalized theaters in town, including the Gogol Center, the Yermolova Theater and the Pushkin Theater, in a regeneration project like none this city has seen for decades.

For added flavor keep in mind that this is not even close to the last of the major developments underway.

Anatoly Vasilyev is soon set to return to Moscow in the official capacity of teacher and head of his own school. Meanwhile, the ground at his former theater the School of Dramatic Art is shifting, as several former laboratory leaders have quietly been moved out of the picture,

leaving only artistic director Igor Yatkso and director Dmitry Krymov firmly in place. Something is brewing there.

Furthermore, things will change soon at the world-renowned Taganka Theater, which continues to live in turmoil following the exit of Yury Lyubimov two years ago.

Finally, as a fitting exeunt to this piece, I should add that on Wednesday the highly acclaimed young director Vasily Barkhatov was named artistic director of St. Petersburg's Mikhailovsky Opera Theater. Barkhatov, who turns 30 at the end of this month, has had numerous successful productions at the Mariinsky, the Bolshoi and other venues.

Are there more changes in store? I guarantee it. Don't blink. Stay tuned.

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