

Russian Theater Bids Fond Farewell to the F-word

By [John Freedman](#)

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Actors, directors and writers gathered at the Meyerhold Center on Friday to protest a new law banning obscenities that will take effect on July 1.

Russia's newest law employing repressive action to regulate behavior and culture will take effect July 1. The law, signed by Russian president Vladimir Putin in early May, will ban the use of obscenities in "television, cinema, literature, mass media, concerts and theatrical productions," [according](#) to Vedomosti.

This has brought about an ongoing culture of jokes about how Russian theater will now have to become the art of, and for, doing good, while it also brought about a sense of disbelief. The liberation of language, of expression, and of the individual point of view has been one of the true accomplishments of Russian culture in the new era.

Be that as it may, the vast majority of theaters have announced that they will either remove plays including obscenities from their repertoires, or they will replace offending words with

lexical items more acceptable to the government. Not everybody is ready to roll over and accept the law without question, however.

Yelena Gremina, the managing director and a co-founder of Teatr.doc, Moscow's most experimental theater space, [told](#) Afisha magazine last week that she has no plans to make any changes. "Censorship is still banned by our constitution," she said, "let's not forget that."

"It seems to me," Gremina continued, "that it is improper to think that there is some virtual father, who must always forbid things to people as though they were little children and slap their hands if they reach for their mouth. I do not consider myself a child. I am a grown, responsible person, capable of lecturing anyone on all sorts of possible values, from family to patriotic. And I do not believe anyone has the right to tell me what the spectators of my theater should see. Spectators are not babes in diapers. I think it is insulting to consider a nation so ignorant that it must be dictated to."

On Friday and Saturday — Friday was the 215th anniversary of Alexander Pushkin's birth — two events in Moscow staked out an opposing position to the law.

At the Playwright and Director Center Klim on Saturday offered up a special evening of recitals of Pushkin's so-called obscene poetry. Across town the previous day, the Meyerhold Center hosted an evening of poetry, music, prose and theatrical excerpts — all containing expletives, of course — that was titled *Almanakh*, which we will allow ourselves clumsily to translate as "Alma you!" It followed the final performance at the Meyerhold of Maksym Kurochkin's "Herbivores," which, due to its choice language, will be removed from the theater's repertory.

Kurochkin fans take heart, however. "Herbivores" will reopen next season in a new version at Teatr.doc.

As for *Almanakh*, it was a checkered, though lively, event. Held in the fourth-floor cafe that accommodates 60 or 70 people comfortably, it probably counted 200 spectators at its peak. Poets Andrei Rodionov and Vsevolod Yemelin recited some of their choicest compositions. Actors, working on two days of scattered rehearsals, took to the stage and performed short scenes from an array of contemporary texts that dare name things with their proper names. Among the performed works were Mikhail Ugarov's "The Death of Ilya Ilyich," Vladimir Sorokin's "The Dugout," Yury Klavdiyev's "The Slow Sword," and Anna Yablonskaya's "Pagans."

It would be less than honest to ignore the fact that the withering onslaught of profanity occasionally grew tedious. At a certain point, when some had had their fill, the audience slowly began thinning out. Still, two scenes — a monologue from the Presnyakov brothers' "Playing the Victim" and a four-actor scene from Pavel Pryazhko's "Life Is Grand" — stood as hard proof that this law is a blow to Russian literature and theater.

The Presnyakov monologue, the furious rant of an overwhelmed policeman who is fed up with casual violence, was a stunner in 1993 when we first heard it, and it remains so today. Similar was a scene from Pryazhko's play, which premiered in 2009, and which tenderly and paradoxically portrays a strange four-way love affair amid an incongruous barrage of obscenities.

Throughout the evening a group that we might call “proper individuals” took the stage to read excerpts from writings about the power and freedom of Russian language and literature by such classic authors as Pushkin, Ivan Turgenev, Anna Akhmatova and Nikolai Zabolotsky.

The literary part of the festivities ended as emcee Oksana Mysina read a new text written by playwright Yevgeny Kazachkov.

It concluded with the words, “After all, if you call a difficult life difficult, it does not become less difficult for that. Call a “f***ed up life f***ed up and things get a little easier.”

Literature was followed by merriment, as a rag-tag band of musicians performed a newly-composed song, “F***ed Up Parliamentarians,” that had the audience laughing harder than ever, while the house came down when actor Alexei Yudnikov appeared in a dress, rather like Conchita Wurst, the transsexual winner of the recent Eurovision Song Contest, to recite Pushkin’s classic poem, “I Loved You Once, Love May Still Be Possible.”

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