**Revolutions Remembered: the Golden Mask Festival in Moscow 2017**

**Maria Shevtsova**

The 2017 Golden Mask and National Theatre Award and Festival offered, as it usually does, a wide range of large- and small-scale theatre, musical theatre, opera, ballet, contemporary dance and puppetry ­– a month and more of intensive activity that keeps its annually changing jury on its toes. Maria Shevtsova provides an overview of the Russian Case, a concentration of productions for foreign producers and critics that reflects quite accurately the Golden Mask’s complete spoken theatre selection (as distinct from other forms of theatre such as dance, for example). Her review observes that a cluster of productions refers to rebellions and revolutions that preceded the 1917 October Revolution, while none deals with material directly related to this event. Remaining works allude in various ways to more recent Russian and global history, showing how its makers are sensitive to a past that filters through the country’s, and the world’s, more than troubling present. Maria Shevtsova, Professor at Goldsmiths, University of London, is co-editor of *New Theatre Quarterly*.

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Curated by the theatre critics Alyona Karas and Kristina Matvienko, the Russian Case offered a fairly representative selection of works from the much larger programme of the Golden Mask Festival; and it managed to include, as has not really been possible before, examples of musicals, which appear to have been a rapidly growing interest in Russian theatre in the past few years. The most striking example is *The Young Guard*, directed by Maxim Didenko and Dmitri Yegorov from St Petersburg. The work is based on Aleksandr Fadeyev’s patriotic 1946 novel about youthful resistance fighters against the German invaders in 1942-43 in eastern Ukraine. The Russian Case also showed contemporary dance (ballet is still beyond its reach), but it generally had practical difficulties, balancing the number of small-scale productions on offer with main-stage big ones.

What was especially pleasing, this time round, was the Russian Case’s inclusion of several productions outside the Golden Mask competition that were available for one or two performances within its time-scale. This meant that Russian Case visitors were able to see the new works of such favourites as Kirill Serebrennikov (*Kafka* by Valery Pecheykin at Serebrennikov’s Gogol Centre), Yury Butusov (Brecht’s *Drums in the Night ­–* his very first play – in repertory at the Pushkin theatre, but showing only for one night) and Timofey Kulyabin (Chekhov’s *Ivanov* at the Theatre of Nations). Fortunately, I was able to ‘twin’ *Ivanov* with Kulyabin’s *Three Sisters.* The latter waswell and truly a runner in the Golden Mask, but beyond the period of the Russian Case. (See *NTQ* 123, 2015 for Butusov and Kulaybin in the Golden Mask Festival of that year.)

It was intriguing to observe the indirect references to 1917 in the Golden Mask 2017. Or, it is perhaps more accurate to say that productions shown at the festival skirted around 1917, picking out what their directors and companies saw either as the revolution’s nefarious precedents or its post-revolutionary calamities, heaving in its aftermath in some way.

To the group of ‘precedents’ belonged *Rebels*, written and directed by Aleksandr Molochnikov, an actor of the Moscow Art Theatre, for this house. A huge, rambunctious work full of satire, tomfoolery, burlesque, jokes and 1980s and 1990s ‘underground’ rock, its starts with a relatively gentle parody of the Decembrists’ revolt against the tsar in 1825. The iconic Russian poet, Aleksandr Pushkin, was of these luckless heroes, most of whom Nichloas I sent to Siberia, sparing Pushkin to write for another day. A cheeky Pushkin glides by on ice skates as part of the double-edged humour of the scenes these idealistic rebels set for a violent future.

Subsequent revolutionary figures of nineteenth-century Russia are presented in a louder, sharper tone. There are sketches of incidents perpetrated by the terrorists known as the People’s Will, the terrorist Sergey Nechayev (a prototype of Dostoevsky’s *The Devils)*, the anarchist Mikhaïl Bakunin, and Marx somewhere else. All allude to the cumulative efforts that turned into October 1917, about which, other than these hints, there is nothing. Meanwhile, cinema-style pictures are projected on a screen at the back (many are of the anti-heroes on the stage), where, on a platform, bands perform their rock songs until the end of the show. The assumption, it would seem, is that this underground music of the modern era served as sociopolitical critique, without spilling blood. For all its energy and interest, it is hard to see what else *Rebels* might have been saying other than ‘“revolutionary ideology” begets destruction, which begets more destruction’; and this generalized ‘revolutionary ideology’, which is of little interpretative value, appears to be the motif justifying the production’s broad sweep.

*Bely. Petersburg,* after Andrey Bely’s 1913 phantasmagorical novel and performed by the St Petersburg Musical Comedy Theatre, provided a surprising comparison. This was so not only because it had the whole arsenal of musicals at its disposal, which spoken theatre like *Rebels* simply cannot muster, but also because it handled Bely’s surrealistic twists and turns very skillfully in an idiom that one might be pardoned for thinking was not tuned in to Bely’s kinds of concerns. Bely’s main purpose, besides evoking the city’s cold, misty but mysterious atmosphere, was to lampoon the reactionary civil servant Ableukhov and his narcissistic, wannabe bomb-throwing son, who was ordered to murder him: the time is the revolutionary year 1905. Here the theme ‘reaction begets revolution’ predominates, while it contends that the second is unable to correct the first. The production confidently displays its gallery of grotesques and, after working primarily for laughs, ends with a series of powerful images of terror and war – again, projected on a screen.

These images are from documentary footage recalling the revolution, the Civil War and World War I, followed by a fast-forward of twentieth-century war history, which ends with a shock: the image that went across the world of the metro carriage blasted by a bomb in St Petersburg just two days before. And this, together with the entire production ­–­ beautiful voices to a wonderful orchestra – raises the question of whether a musical can actually handle such subjects without trivializing the human tragedies at their heart. *Bely. Petersburg* was my ‘replacement’ for *The* *Young Guard*, which I was unable to see, but a similar question might well have been pertinent to it. There is, of course, an additional issue, too large for a short review, which concerns the *reasons* for Russian directors choosing musicals for broaching difficult history.

Butusov’s *Drums in the Night* belongs to the group revolving around the idea of the ‘aftermath’ of 1917. In his inimitable, extravagant-humourous style, Butusov dresses Kragler, Brecht’s returned soldier who reclaims Anna, his promised bride, in a petticoat supposed to be a wedding dress. All actions developing from this central one expose the absurd behavior of people devoured by fear and insecurity, which breed hatred and greed. Gunshot-fire from the Spartacist uprising in Germany of 1919 – encouraged by the Russian revolution – is interspersed with an eclectic range of cabaret, pop and rock, such a medley having become a Butusov signature in the last approximately ten years. Etude-style extrapolations and variations on themes (another of his signatures) build up to a let-it-all-hang-out rock-concert conclusion (another signature) to the beat of thunderous drums. Although apparently fragmented, the production holds Brecht’s text together, never losing sight of its political asides.

*Drums in the Night* could not have been more different from the site-specific perambulatory performance of *Refugee Conversations*, with spectators listening through earphones, at Moscow’s Leningrad station. Brecht wrote this play in 1940-41, at the time that he fled Germany for Finland. The performance piece is a neutralized, rather flat reading for two placed by Petersburg directors Konstantin Uchitel and Vladimir Kuznetsov in various spots in the station. In St Petersburg, it was performed in that city’s Finland station, known for having been Lenin’s destination, one hundred years ago.

Different, again, in the ‘ aftermath ‘ bracket, was *Magadan/Cabaret*, Yury Pogrebnichko’s sobre production whose very name tells a story, since it can only refer to the Magadan gulag situated in far-eastern Siberia. Its narrative is implied, as well, by the simple fact of one or two actors singing 1930s popular songs and, occasionally, songs composed in Magadan, accompanied by an accordion. These actors, within a small group, sit on tiered benches – movement, like speech, is minimal throughout; now and then, two figures in Siberian Buddhist clothing quietly appear and quietly chant. The production’s delicate apposition of visual and vocal images, layered by occasional screen images – ­ a ship’s funnel blowing smoke, two people struggling to walk, up to their waist in snow – recalls Siberia’s long-distant religious past, plundered by the barbarism of Magadan. *Magadan/ Cabaret* was, deservedly, the Golden Mask winner of the category ‘theatre of small forms’.

Turning now to the remaining Russian Case offerings, which featured Heiner Goebbels’ remarkable sound score with soloist, *Max Black or 62 Ways of* *Supporting the Head with a Hand*, performed whimsically, accurately, and elegantly performed by Aleksandr Panteleyev, widely known for his role in Anatoly Vasilyev’s pathbreaking 1979 *The Grown Daughter of a Young Man*. This took place in the newly redesigned and refurbished, exciting Stanislavsky Electrotheatre whose managing director and director of numbers of its vanguard productions is Boris Yukhananov, also from Vasilyev’s school. Then, at the Moscow Art Theatre, there was *Central Park West* after Woody Allen, staged by Konstantin Bogomolov; it showed Bogomolov’s light-hearted side as well as his directorial versatility. Bogomolov can handle social comedy with as much aplomb as vertiginous satire (*An* *Ideal Husband*, 2013) or politically concentrated satire (*Boris Godunov*, 2014) and everything else in his mixes of genres, not least in *The Dragon* (2017) after Evgeny Shvarts.

*Russian Romance* (winner of the Golden Mask for ‘best production’) by the Lithuanian Marius Ivaškevičius (winner for playwriting), focused on scenes from Sofia Tolstoy’s life with her famous husband Lev, seen from a mildly comic point of view rather than from its dramatic reality. The director is the Lithuanian-born and Moscow-trained Mindaugas Karbauskis who, at forty-five (together with Serebrennikov, who is forty-seven, Bogomolov, forty-two, Dmitri Volkostrelov, thirty-five and Kulaybin, a mere thirty-two), is among the new generation of leading directors in Russia today. I have, however, seen him more adventurous in the past than he has proved to be in he present. This is probably tied up with his recently taking charge of the Mayakovsky Theatre, which has a well established ensemble company with deeply rooted practices.

Kulyabin’s *Ivanov* neatly ironed out some of Chekhov’s obtrusive problems of structure, content and dialogue. To start with, the play rambles, its eponymous protagonist, while central, is out of focus, and his few anti-Semitic jibes against his wife are misogynistic as well as racist. Kulyabin manages to shift attention away from these negative features by shaping his production according to a sequence of genres. The first is on the lines of 1970s ‘soap’ domestic drama, helped along by the wonderful Evgeny Moronov, artistic director of the Theatre of Nations, who plays Ivanov. It merges in the next act with larger than life sit-com, punctuated by ruthless satire that exposes every aspect of 1970s Soviet culture, going from over-tight clothes, heavy make-up and bouffon hair to crude behavior and mindless conversation into which racism, misogyny, insularity and cruelty seem all but to disappear. A vibrant, sassy Elizaveta Boyarskaya, borrowed from the Maly Drama Theatre of St Petersburg, who plays the infatuated Sasha as a modern woman, throws the deftly etched banality of it all into sharp relief. Kulyabin’s direction reveals a new maturity in the depth and something like kindness in his observation of human ignorance, only to shift gear into the melodrama and farce of the last two acts.

Kulaybin, it seems to me, is still in search of his voice as a director, but there is a sureness of tone and touch in each of the shifting genres constituting *Ivanov* to suggest that, when he finds it, it will be strong and true. His *Three Sisters* with his own company, the Red Torch from Novosibirsk, is part of that search as he explores the gestures of sign language with actors who are not hearing impaired. We have had, in Britain, the experience of The Theatre of the Deaf. Not so, to my knowledge, in the theatre in Russia. It is a very sensitive question, this one, of how you adopt a language in the theatre that is not your own; that, as in this case, is a language of disability. Reponses to the question as a *question* will vary greatly, as they must. In the concrete instance of this production, it has to be said, for example, that, for all its finely wrought nuances, Masha’s farewell to Vershinin is so heart-rending, and his brusque reaction to her feelings – violent enough to knock her over ­– is so wrong but, paradoxically, so compelling that you forget the question. The Golden Mask awarded the company a special prize for its ensemble work.

Another variant on experimental probing is Volkostrelov’s minimalist *The* *Field* with Teatr post, founded in St Petersburg in 2011. According to Volkostrelov, the play, by his collaborator Pavel Pryzhko, follows the laws of quantum physics and, in this, it provides an entirely new way of writing for the theatre. Perhaps these laws are alluded to in how numbers (at the throw of a dice?) are written on blackboards at opposite ends of a narrow rectangular space and seem to affect what each actor does in relation to a colleague beside near him or her. These actors sit on the matts along the two longer sides of the rectangle. Their movements are contained, and are not in the least illustrative of the situation ­–­ the harvesting of grain crops on an agricultural complex – whose ‘events’ are narrated by voice-over. This voice speaks in a similarly documentary way of the love and sex relationships of the two sets of partners who are said to work here.

In other words, none of this is conveyed through dialogue or embodied in action: the narration and the doing – getting up, sitting down, lying down, and other restricted movements – are on parallel tracks and do not express, interpret or explain each other. Well, yes ­­­– to bowdlerize a layperson’s vocabulary of quantum physics, with apologies ­– the energy levels of the particles (that is, the actors) are low. However, there seems little sense in foraging in quantum physics for a key; spectators could just as well lie back and think of Beckett, or of John Cage whose *Lecture on Nothing* Volkastrelov and his team presented beautifully in white space with white veils and the disembodied voices of the actors hidden behind them. This was in 2016, for twelve spectators for each performance.

The director who received the Golden Mask for best director was St Petersburg’s Andrey Maguchy, known for many years as a champion of ‘avant-garde’ theatre. His highly stylized *The Storm* pulls out from every corner of Ostrovsky’s familiar play its archaic, rural Russian universe. Thus the production renders with exquisite subtlety the incantatory quality of old, and now virtually forgotten, village speech – its diction, pronunciation, inflections, cadences, and its overall formal phrasing, which give this speech a particular kind of gravitas and beauty. Its musicality, constructed polyphonically through the different timbres of the voices speaking, is enriched, in counterpoint, by the singing voice of a tenor from the Mariinsky Opera in the role of Boris. He is Katerina Kabanova’s lover in this tragic tale of illicit love in a closed, profoundly traditional milieu.

It is quite clear that Moguchy did not aim to reconstruct the social daily-life patterns of the small community in which a matriarch, rather than a patriarch, saw to moral order and wifely obedience with an iron fist. Instead, he looked closely at the ritual structures that gave such a community its *misterium*: its religious atmosphere and aura, and its quasi-sacred attitude to, and rendition of, daily life, evident in the bowed greetings, hieratical sitting, intoned conversation and other such ceremonial behaviours. Maguchy also created *misterium* by using platforms on small wheels that rolled the characters in from the back wall to the front of the stage. In this way, they appeared to glide rather than to walk into the space from out of nowhere, from the darkened areas of the stage. The impression of magic is real enough, regardless of the fact that visible machinery produces it. Katya, outcast from her community, meets her death with dignified submission both to love and purification.

Costumes recall archaic dress in every detail. Lightning, which flashes in designer strips and jagged edges on the back wall, panels of colour, strange sounds – all suggesting Robert Wilson’s, perhaps unconsciously assimilated, influence ­– contributes to the poetic, but foreboding, quality of the whole. Even so, Maguchy’s highly stylized approach is a little cautious, whereas it could have gone for broke. Actors presented more rigorously in the externalized Wilson style for effect, while funneling emotional intensity inwards, à la the Russian school (not a Wilson trait), might well have turned this marvelous production into a superlative one. And, speaking of Robert Wilson – his was the prize for best lighting for *La Traviata* (2016) at the Tchaikovsky Theatre of Opera and Ballet in Perm, which he also directed.

While writing, I have realized that this review leans heavily on Moscow and St Petersburg. Drawing back to survey the scene, the main reason appears to be that most of the performances scheduled for the Russian Case, many of which I could not see, come from these metropolises. The coordination of available performances with the short duration of the Russian Case is always a problem for its organizers. Just the same, where the category ‘drama’ was concerned, they reflected the predominantly metropolitan selection made by the jury of this category for the Golden Mask as a whole. There was a greater regional presence for opera and musical theatre.

So, my review concludes with *Hamle*t from the Maly Drama Theatre of St Petersburg-Theatre of Europe directed by Lev Dodin. The production, having been premiered to great acclaim in its home city in spring 2016, was expected impatiently – to the point where fights broke out at the box office for tickets, while the racketeers across town resold them for the equivalent of up to £200 a pop. This extortionist price had something to do with the fact that the Dodin-school actors Elizaveta Boyarskaya, Ksenia Rappaport, and Danila Kozlovsky – Ophelia, Gertrude, and Hamlet – are film and television superstars while being permanent members of the Maly ensemble since before the end of their their student days with Dodin and his co-teachers. In any case, the MDT is a magnet by its huge reputation in Russia as well as abroad.

*Hamlet* is unusual, relative to the MDT’s practice, in that it is billed as ‘a composition by Lev Dodin after Saxo Grammaticus, Raphael Holinshed, William Shakespeare and Boris Pasternak’. It is not the names of the production’s sources that strike the eye – Pasternak is included as the renowned translator of *Hamlet* into Russian – but Dodin’s claim to its co-authorship; and this is corroborated by how the text is shortened and its plot shaped, while sections of dialogue owe nothing to Shakespeare, let alone to Grammaticus or Holinshed, but are Dodin’s own words. His inventions provide a radical reassessment of established views of Hamlet: Stanislavsky’s Christ-like figure saving the world; Pasternak’s prince with a conscience avenging the good; the Soviet intelligentsia’s mirror of itself as trapped by power, and variations on such paradigms, including Lyubimov-Vysotsky’s Hamlet as a resistance freedom-fighter, doomed to perdition in repressive times. This Hamlet has nothing heroic about him, and is vicious through and through.

Further, Dodin reflects on his own relation to Shakespeare – for instance, when replacing the First Player’s speech (Act III, i) with Lear’s on his unkind daughters – a direct reference to his 2006 production, centered on abusive families: Boyarskaya played Goneril and Kozlovsky, Edgar. Dodin also reflects on the world today, using pervasive realities and current language in his interpolations. What they reveal are narcissism, selfishness, harshness, hardness and, among other things, self-interested, merely transactional relations between people who, like Dodin-Kozlovsky’s Hamlet, are loveless. These humans are, additionally, so intent on gratification that, after their deeds are done to get it, gratification has lost its value.

Even killing for the gratification of desires – in Hamlet’s case, for driven revenge – loses its sense. It becomes increasingly clear that Hamlet’s killing is not a matter of perverted satisfaction, but a process of calculated elimination. When it is all done – he poisons Gertrude and finishes off Claudius – Kozlovsky-Hamlet has nothing left to do but to kill himself. This is implied when he goes down the ladder at the centre of the stage into the pit below. The Players suddenly appeared from beneath the stage on this short ladder, grouped tightly on it, calm and still, like a chorus from Greek tragedy. Boyarskaya-Ophelia, a strong willed, decisive young woman, who knows what she wants, is intertwined with Hamlet on it; or else she masturbates, seated on it, and then slips quietly down into the hole; Hamlet fishes out Yorik’s skull with a stick from somewhere on its invisible lower rungs. By the end of the production, the ladder’s Biblical associations are unmissable. It is too short to go upwards. The only way is down, to hell.

Spectators face a mortifying, horrifying worldview, but such is Dodin’s *Hamlet*. It transpires, during the production’s concentrated two hours and forty minutes with only eight actors, that Gertrude and Claudius had plotted Hamlet’s father’s death. Gertrude, whom Rapport consistently draws as motivated by reason, tells Hamlet that she and Claudius loved each other, and it was she who killed his father to be rid of his cruel tyranny. (A quotation from Lady Macbeth emphasizes Dodin’s rather obvious comparison.) She lets the audience know, during dialogue with Claudius, that she had plotted with him to send Hamlet to be murdered in England. Why? Hamlet was difficult, irascible – he had killed Polonius – but, above all, he was a nuisance in her life. She and Claudius tacitly agree that Ophelia, too, had become a nuisance and had to be strangled. Without saying a word, they murder Ophelia, after a swift scuffle on the third, top level of the massive metallic scaffolding that encases the space ­­–­ a metaphor for Denmark’s prison and our calamitous world, designed by Aleksandr Borovsky. Aleksandr is the son of David, whose last design for Dodin before his death in 2006 was *King Lear*. The heavy, sweeping curtain – Shakespeare’s arras turned into a visual metaphor for Lyubimov’ iconic 1976 *Hamlet* ­– was David Borovksy’s.

Kozlovsky more than deserved the Golden Mask for best male actor. His was a razor sharp performance, powerful and swift, like an arrow heading for its target. The light burning in his eyes and nuanced facial expressions for Hamlet’s resolve were to be reckoned with, amid exceptionally strong but contained performances all round.