



MARINA DAVYDOVA: SOME THOUGHTS ON RUSSIAN THEATRE AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

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WHITE DRESSES.

“OUR PRODUCTIONS ARE ABSOLUTELY SAFE.”

The Russian theatre of the past decade has been largely drawn into the orbit of the theatre of Europe. Or it is rather the other way around – European drama has turned out of the blue to occupy the Russian theatre space to the effect of considerably changing the local theatrical landscape. In terms of major theatrical forums Moscow has lately left far behind all the capitals and mega cities of the world: the Chekhov Festival, the Territory, the NET, the Stanislavsky Season to mention just a few. In the context of the current guest tour hullabaloo even the Golden Mask that is by definition (“national theatre award and festival”) prescribed to cultivate predominantly the national stage has scaled up to acquire the European dimension by bringing along the productions of overseas dignitaries.

All this has perceptibly contributed to getting over Russia’s traditional isolationism to the effect that the new theatre generation has been evolving in a radically new context. It is therefore small wonder that this generation has in a large measure happened to be in opposition to what may be called the mainstream of the Russian theatre thought of as a quiet preserve vigilantly fenced off from the problems of the modern world and current aesthetic trends, where the great traditions of the past are held sacred.

Throughout the nineties the Russian theatre existed in a distinctive kind of ghetto, making no attempts to digest aesthetically the rapidly changing reality: we are here all by ourselves, all dressed in white, while the reality stinks and has nothing to do with us. Paradoxical as it may sound, in the post-perestroika period we could claim to have Europe’s most asocial public and theatre. In the Soviet times theatre managed to substitute, no matter how clumsily, for the civil society. But it clearly failed to become an integral component of this springing up new society that was offering a wider range of freedoms.

The social and political affectation somehow ran dry as the long-standing rules of playing cat-and-mouse game with the authorities became invalid. Furthermore, in the nineties the Russian theatre as a curious mixture of sacred traditions and commercial bagatelle (the so called “savage capitalism” exerted a very strong influence to bear upon theatre) stayed unaware of the new rhythms and accents and was unable to see the new visual environment we all happened to be in. Now in the late 1990-s a new generation came out on stage with the intention to translate these rhythms and accents, this visual and audio environment into the language of theatre. These people attempted to modernize the

Russian theatre and make it concordant with the new times.

Apparently one of the first attempts to help the national stage cope with the modern reality and enter the European context was made by the new drama movement. Its emergence was almost directly provoked by missionaries from London's Royal Court Theatre. But the seeds they sowed would have hardly come up unless they hadn't fallen on the here and there well-dunged soil.

In 2004 *The Art of Cinematography* quarterly carried an article by Mikhail Ugarov, one of the founders of the underground Theatre.doc, a melancholic intellectual with predilection for playing dramaturgical games with the Russian history and Russian classics. In actual fact he has proved to be all but the most ardent proponent of the new theatre religion. Ugarov wrote (never mind that this is going to be a long quotation): "Our (i.e. Russian) productions are absolutely safe. They will tell you nothing about what is currently happening to the country and to us all... As a result of these performances none of the villains will shudder, no Claudius will leave, covering his face. And there is no Stanislavsky to exclaim: 'I don't believe!' at seeing the big lie of our celebration of theatre. And the prospects are no comfort at all. The disease is progressing. Young people don't go to theatre. Fashionable tabloids and radio stations carry no theatre reviews.

TV channels show no programs about theatre for the ratings are bound to be very low. One has to admit that they are right: people have no need of theatre... Those with a good taste for entertainment are frequenting the places that seem more suitable in terms of high-tech and quality of product. And those aspiring for something else are attending the exhibition of

intellectual art, watching art house movies or, having no better choice, stay home and read the latest publications of intellectual literature. Today's theatre-goers are visitors, ladies over forty with girlfriends and a chance public performing Ritualistic Cultural Act."

With all his polemical cockiness Ugarov is right. Indeed, an average production of the Russian theatre today exemplifies an amazing aesthetic anachronism. It seems to have been staged not nowadays but some 15 (20, 30) years ago. And the only thing that can be done is to perform the Ritualistic Cultural Act.

If a person suffers from anemia he is prescribed a particular medicine. The new drama has become precisely that bitter pill to be swallowed by the Russian stage as was prescribed by those practitioners who had timely become aware of the threat. Theatre.doc and later the Practica Theatre, established by Edward Boyakov, started to come up with relevant and topical productions. Suffice it to mention the titles: *The Play about Money*, *Democracy.doc*, *The War of Moldavians over the Cardboard Box* (about the life of "Gastarbeiters"), *Manager*, *The Celestials* (about oligarchs).

The artistic qualities of these stagings are a separate and all too often a rather sensitive question. But doubtlessly they have restored the balance that was in a large measure disrupted in the Russian theatre. In particular, they endeavored to bring theatre back to the "bosom" of the civic society out of which it seemed to have irreparably fallen.

In the meantime a lone and forbidding rock has risen over the violent and silted aesthetic current known as "new drama" – an Irkutsk-born playwright Ivan Vyrypayev.

SOME OXYGEN IN THE BLOOD

IVAN VYRYPAYEV

At various times and in various interviews the author of the famous *The Oxygen* maintained in fully keeping with the new drama postulates that writers are called to reflect the realities of

modern life. Meanwhile, in contrast with most of the representatives of "the new writing" he seems to be least concerned with recording the course of this life.

Not only is he a “lone ranger” in this current, he is standing up against the trend of which he is invariably considered to be a member. The action of his more significant works is set in some cosmic vistas where the demonic characters are roaming without rudder or sails, trying to find faith in faithlessness and love in the absence of love.

With rare exceptions all modern arts are striving to disparage whatever is traditionally viewed as sublime, to knock heroes off their pedestals, eliminate all kinds of affectation assuming that these days affectation is always false. Vyrypayev rises on the pedestal and from the top of it addresses God and the world.

It is not the modernity he is settling the accounts with but the Creator. He is acutely aware of the ripple soil he is standing on and of the flowers of evil that are blossoming on this soil. He inhales the intoxicating aroma of the exotic plants, bunches them up into weird bouquets and goes out of his way to discern the seeds of good among the seeds of evil...

The hero of Patrick Zuskind’s *Parfumeur* comes to believe that an essence, or rather a quintessence, can be distilled not only out of combinations of flowers, but of human beauty as such.

Vyrypayev is trying to experiment with reality in much the same manner as Grenouille experimented with women, namely to distill the quintessence. In the production of his play *July* that was started to be staged at *Practica* and in the end of the day was staged by Vyrypayev’s faithful “companion-in-arms” Viktor Ryzhakov (he also staged *The Oxygen* and *Existence No. 2*) aesthetic pleasure is derived from the very process of sublimation. Abounding in obscenities and horrifying physiological details the story of a cannibal maniac who killed a neighbor for nothing, strangled and ate up a mangy dog, cut to pieces and devoured his savior Misha, gobbled up a nurse is little by little transformed into a story of a human soul’s wanderings in the vale of life and of the all-consuming devilish love in the literal sense of the word.

The most important notions of human life that are in the opening scenes of *July* written in lower-case letters should have been engrossed toward the finale. The more terrifying is the set-out, the more elevating should be the ending.

The sons of the hero, mentioned in passing, live in the city of Archangelsk. Just lend an attentive ear to this name. As pronounced by the amazing actress of Peter Fomenko’s *Workshop* Polina Agureyeva, the monologue of the cannibal is subjected to yet another kind of sublimation, this time sublimation through theatre. It has certainly been a long time since an actress of such reckless boldness and such flawless technique was last seen on the national stage.

Vyrypayev masterfully conveys the distinctive stylistic properties of the “out-of-joint” modern consciousness, unable to find peace in faith or faithlessness. The romanticism with its Manfredian revolt, Dostoyevsky with his men from the underground, Jean Genet with his keen interest in the seamy side of human soul – all these and many other things are found in *July* in the form of flickering literary reminiscences.

At times his “dressing” of the text and its poetic structure make one even recall Faulkner’s *Sound and Fury* with its brilliant rendering of weak-headed Benjamin’s stream of consciousness. But what really matters is the process of converting words into the rhythm, physiology into emotion, depreciated vocabulary into poetry. Essentially this conversion is the theme and story of this remarkable production. In fact it is the theme of all the works of Vyrypayev as an emblematic representative of the new drama who is not afraid to raise the accursed questions of existence and seeks no compromise in this matter.

PLAYING WITH PLASTILINE

KIRILL SEREBRENNIKOV

In the beginning closely associated with the new drama was one of the most brilliant directors of the new generation Kirill Serebrennikov. He literally fought his way into Moscow's theatrical scene by staging Vasilij Sigarev Plasticine at the Center for Playwriting and Directing. Until that time the Rostov-on-Don-born director assayed his aptitudes outside Moscow. And he did it "in one stroke" in theatre, film and television and was even honored with the prestigious TAFI TV award. His second production in Moscow was Mark Ravenhill's *Some Explicit Polaroids* at the subsidiary stage of the Pushkin Theatre.

"Such plays are not a material but an occasion for staging, - he used to explain to me. - After we cut all the stage directions in Plasticine, all that was left were "shit", "fuck", "suck"... Such a text is more difficult to work with than Hamlet. Understand?"

Yes, I do. Swimming in shallow water is less comfortable than in an ocean. Serebrennikov swims and swims and does it well. He is on the whole a showy director, or rather is quite fond of scenic effects and doesn't shun at scandalous escapades. His productions always abound in music, reckless and vibrantly mischievous acting, reprises, ingenious (although not always unforced) gaiety. He is often reproached for lack of chiaroscuro, profundity, thoughtful silence, but this is not a flaw but the nature of his flair. He is not so much an explorer as a smart show-maker, consciously staking on billboard luster. It is unwise to complain that a pink doesn't smell like a rose. It certainly doesn't but it surely has many other virtues.

For the "shallow water" drama Serebrennikov invented a new and in many ways an oppositional to Stanislavsky "method of physical actions."

His actors wouldn't say a word just for the sake of it. They would necessarily jump, lie down or perform an acrobatic trick. Physical actions don't induce a desired condition (if you want tension in pronouncing a monologue, take a bottle and try to uncork it), but illustrate it in a rather ironical manner. In

general his performances resemble a modern dance performed not to the music but to the text of a play, which seems only logical considering that both in modern dance and in modern drama the protagonist is always the crowd.

In both cases the characters are so-and-sos having nothing notable about them and presenting interest only in their totality. What Serebrennikov did was to boldly implement the technology of interbreeding modern text and modern dance. This didn't turn shallow water into an ocean but Serebrennikov deserves going down in theatre history for having been the first in Russia to find a new and, more importantly, an adequate scenic language for the modern drama.

The knack of creating spectacular theatrical shows is by itself a rare occurrence. But what Serebrennikov distinctly stands out for is not just that, but first and foremost his ability to combine this knack of his with the bringing up of acute social issues. Paradoxically enough, this ability became especially perceptible after he somewhat stepped away from the new drama and turned to the classics. This ability appeared as large as life in Ostrovsky's *The Forest*, not quite as large in Anthony and Cleopatra and later in Figaro. In its treatments of the classics the Russian theatre rarely allowed itself to make straightforward social statements.

And when it did, it happened within the cramped space of the new drama, like Theatre.doc or Praktika Theatre. But the productions of these companies were short of spectacle or effect for the simple reason of being small and having no space for a director to really launch out. Meanwhile Serebrennikov needs a lot of space. He knows how to work with big-timers on a big stage (which is also rare nowadays). He knows how to turn his compositions into the events of high life. In the meantime he is not indifferent to the quests of the Western theatre and time and again he borrows something from it to try and adapt them to the Russian soil.

This directorial style, socially relevant in declarations but commercial in form, oriented on

the Western art house but rooted in the Russian tradition of benefit performances seems to be the exclusive product of the present day. However it has analogues in the Soviet-Russian past and these analogues are the productions by Mark Zakharov, the founder of the former Soviet Union's most popular Lenkom Theatre. With all the differences between these two figures a number of common features are easily detectable. For Zakharov is also a show-maker, staking on effects and to a degree on the pop component of theatre. It is not accidental that most of his productions abound in music, including live music.

He also always worked with big-timers and allowed them to have reasonably big time on stage. Much like Serebrennikov he was by and large accused of trying to pose a commercial product off for the genuine work of art. Finally, he is probably the only Russian practitioner of theatre who tried to combine the striking, almost Broadway-like theatricality with the raising of acute social issues. The constants of the Lenkom style can be seen with unaided eye in Serebrennikov's latest productions. And in Figaro one thing that

makes it related to Zakharov's works of the Soviet period becomes especially evident – the theme of the lone hero, an idealist among hypocrite go-getters, a romantic in the world of pragmatics.

Zhadov in the legendary Plum Job and Ostap Bender, Rezanov and Baron Munchausen – almost all Zakharov's characters in the Soviet period fit within this pattern. So in Figaro this pattern manifested itself quite clearly. In this production the obstinate and thoughtful Figaro (Eugeni Mironov) bears more resemblance to Griboedov's Chatsky than to the nimble and resilient servant in Beaumarchais' play. Put into his mouth is the monologue that castigates all the social vices of the modern world. All the reprises in this production, all its funny double-dealings are merely a patterned frame for this central motif. The fact that the formally commercial theatre brought up one of the central issues of the "stagnation period" probably for the first time provided theatrical evidence to the effect that the replete decay continues to hold sway outside the theatre. Time took a detour to return to the swampy backwater of the old days...

POSTMODERN / POSTMORTEM ANDREY MOGUCHY

For the Russian theatre Kirill Serebrennikov became a westernizer with a very Russian face. The Western orientation of Andrei Moguchy from St. Petersburg is 100% proof. It took a while before he managed to become adjusted to the Russian theatre practices. He graduated from the Leningrad Institute of Culture but was shaped as an artist during a probation period in Germany and Poland (with Krystian Lupa). He loved (and loves) experimentation in general and experimentation with space in particular. Perhaps he was the first practitioner in Russia who went in for the so called "street theatre". One of his best known works Orlando Furioso was performed as the situation required – on stage, in the square, in a fortress and so forth. Even the name of his company – the Formal Theatre – doesn't sound quite Russian. He was also among the first in this country to have staged Heiner Müller and Vladimir Sorokin.

The program for his production of Hamlet-machine by Müller - Sorokin abounded in the words that frightened off the conservative public. Hamletmachine is not a play but an interactive performance. Instead of sets there are installations, instead of soundtrack – the sound tricks of a popular DJ. This clamorous and blazing opus was quite illustrative of both Moguchy's directorial style and of the destinies of avant-garde in Russia. While Europe was blazing with youth unrest, we were rediscovering Brecht and considered Rozov and Arbuzov to be precursors of the new aesthetics of theatre. Paradoxical as it may sound, the prime objective of the Russian theatre during the thaw period was not to subvert the tradition but to go back to it, back to Stanislavsky's maxima and Meyerhold's directorial principles. The zeal for overthrow was not particularly appealing to us on account of the specificity of our history. What was appealing

was the zeal for reviving whatever had been forgotten, blotted out, primed. We passed by the counterculture without taking much notice of it. The director from St. Petersburg undertook to repair the omission. His production is an anthology of the avant-garde of the 60's and a guide to all the ins and outs of the post-modernist aesthetics. Here one finds happening and the total theatre (nothing can be more total than this encounter with the art that cannot be escaped or ignored) and the contortions of the countercultural unrest. In other words, Moguchy is not so much an innovator as a compiler of the newest theatre encyclopedia for this country that was for decades fenced off against all the rebellious crazes of the West.

However that was only the beginning of his journey, for Andrei Moguchy is the kind of director whose every new opus is dissimilar to the previous one. By the Russian standards he is not so much a theatre director as a tireless deviser. A master and a very handy one. An amusing joker (prestidigitator) of top level proficiency. A conjurer skillfully manipulating with visual images, literary quotations, stage props and meanings... His two productions based on Nabokov are two poles apart. The first – the BITEF Grand Prix winning *The School for Fools* – is a lyrical performance with a touch of irony in the style of Yevgeny Grishkovetz. The second – *Between Dog and Wolf* – is almost an epic. Sasha Sokolov's prose, oozy as a swamp and tart as the smell of silt, rather modernistic than post-modern, seems to be of little use for stage, which holds true for both "jacket" productions (actors speak their lines and embody the characters) and the neo-avant-garde ones (uproar, clank, crackle, nobody moves!, everybody chickens out!). Moguchy with his seemingly apparent predilection for radical methods of impinging on public found in Sokolov's novels a rather unusual source of inspiration. He learned how to hear and visualize this prose. For the novel *Between a Dog and a Wolf* leaves one not with a memory, but with a feeling, a kind of a blurry blot that is very pleasant and fascinating to look at later on. Moguchy managed to convey this feeling. The novel is loquacious whereas the performance is almost silent. And like Sokolov is fighting with the language (this fight probably being the central motif of this work), Moguchy is fighting with the images that swept over him

as a result of reading the novel. The story of love and death is unwillingly and painfully born out of stratification and blending of these images. One may or may not check himself against this story (Russian *Carmen Orina* and her adorers). This will not make the production better or worse, for it appeals not to the intellect but to the properties of the memory. Thus with time the Russian out-of-the-way scene is transformed in one's consciousness into a dense and elegiac mystical civilization, the realm of never-ending ice and wind, represented by a huge, stage-wide piece of polyethylene. But above all there are objects, myriads of them. They cover all the lowered battens. Moguchy & Co seem to have rummaged around all the second-hand goods markets and rubbish dumps in search of authenticity with that off-the-map back of beyond, fictitious and at the same time absolutely real as portrayed by Sokolov. There are no ordinary people here – just cripples and godly tramps, destitute dustmen and freaks. Life doesn't follow a natural pattern and consists of free-and-easy jollity that gives way to lingering depression. The imagery of this production unmistakably betrays the influence of Bruegel (in this Moguchy is by no means unique: the genius of the northern Renaissance is the first artist to come to mind when reading the novel). But the visual overture to this show, projected on the curtain, is not bucolic Bruegel but refined Jan van Eyck with his masterpiece *Portrait of the Arnolfini Couple*. The serene tranquility of this painting that is in the production smoothed over by a touch of irony (husband is slightly shaking his head and wife is stroking her stomach) and the blatant and grotesque world of Bruegel are the two poles between which Moguchi placed his scenic opus. The export version of the production contains everything that should delight an overseas audience – the snow, the skating rink, the ballerina, Pushkin as character of popular jokes... In the meantime there is not a grain of matrioshka platitude. This country is seen through the eyes of man, no matter how much West-oriented, who loves this land and has no other place to go.

THERE ARE MORE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH, HORATIO, THAN ARE DREAMT OF IN YOUR PHILOSOPHY

MINDAUGAS KARBAUSKIS

The only director of the new generation who doesn't seem to be concerned with the juxtaposition of modern-outmoded (or Russian-European) is Mindaugas Karbauskis. Graduate of the Department of Directing (Peter Fomenko's workshop) he at once caught sight of the sharp-eyed artistic director of the Moscow Art Theatre Oleg Tabakov. Karbauskis is no hero for our times. He is not enticed by the role of the cult figure of the sophisticated youth rave-up. Actually he seems to despise it. His interests are focused not on modern life, but on life as such and death as such. Significantly death is the subject of his special interest. Three out of Karbauskis's five productions on the professional stage (Thornton Wildler's Long Christmas Dinner, Nikolay Gogol's Old World Landlords, William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying) actually make a trilogy about death. Considering that philosophizing always begins with contemplation of death, Karbauskis can be tagged as the most philosophy-minded director of the new generation.

The most successful production of Karbauskis's trilogy, The Old World Landlords, was performed at the New Stage of the Moscow Art Theatre. The premiere at the MAT was veiled in the same quiet and hopeless melancholy that prevailed in the staging of Wildler's play. Only the entourage was different. Provincial America changed into the Russian out-of-the way village, and the endlessly propagating and multiplying personages of Long Christmas Dinner were transformed into childless Pulcheria Ivanovna and Afanasij Ivanovitch.

No extraordinary events occur in either of the two plays, except the one and only occurrence – death. In Wildler's play this occurrence becomes a formal story. In the case of Gogol it is different. The author is terrified not by death per se, but by disappearance of the ingenuous and blessed world with all its morals, affections and modes of life.

Karbauskis changes the accents. In his production Polina Medvedeva and Alexander Semchev are playing not the out-of-time

elderly men and woman, but just a family couple living in harmony with the world. In the opening scene Pulcheria Ivanovna is pouring water on her husband's flower-patterned waistcoat and he droops delightfully as though these are real flowers growing out of his body. If there is an opposition to the "sweet couple" in this play, it is represented not by the distant relative ("horrible reformer") who after the death of the personages put an end to their "old world" but their own servants.

In Long Christmas Dinner, death, mowing down the multiple characters, is represented by a maid who lays the table and, which was especially impressing, nursing the children.

In the beginning there is nothing particularly sinister in the conduct of the old world domestics. In Karbauskis's production house maids and the room boy are performing out interludes (including the classical dell'Arte lazzi with a fly), acting out the geese, mentioned in the text, stealing, fooling around – in a word epitomizing the joy of life.

But they also happen to be the heartless grave diggers who bury their mistress after she dies and begin to boss around. They are not terrified by the abyss of death for they are unaware of the meaning of full life. Their attitudes are ultimately functional – if you're hungry we'll feed you, if you die, we'll put you in the ground.

By single touch Pulcheria Ivanovna and Afanasij Ivanovitch animate objects around them – all these jars with jam and marinated mushrooms, old portraits, cupboards and pantries that by magic of just one word of theirs grow out on stage like from underground. On the contrary the domestics treat a human being as an inanimate object. Time and again the maids would wipe off dust from Pulcheria Ivanovna's death-frozen face or use her face as a prop. And housekeeper Yavdoha (Julia Polynskaya) is feeding the landlord with crackers throwing them into his mouth like nuts in the mouth of Nutcracker.

The earthly Eden that used to be the elderly couple's abode is turned into a regular life. In the final scene Pulcheria Ivanovna, walking on points and in every respect unearthly, comes for her husband and takes him with her. Where to? To another Eden? Or just into the dark abyss that the cynical and buoyant servants don't even want to think about? In keeping with the principles of the Lithuanian theatre Karbauskis is striving to impart symbolic dimension to everything. After the death of Pulcheria Ivanovna, servants are washing the floor and Afanasij Ivanovitch, sitting on a

bedside table is sliding down that black wet floor, as though trying to join his wife is sailing across the Styx. And suddenly one becomes acutely aware that Karbauskis miraculously blended together Fomenko's school of good-natured acting and the metaphoric tradition of the Lithuanian theatre. Unconventional as it was, this symbiosis was rather liked by Russian audiences and critics. Karbauskis is little known or appreciated in the West. In Russia he is one of the chief theatrical newsmakers, shunning unruly innovation and therefore particularly loved here.

SINE LOCO-A VIEW FROM ABOVE **AXE ENGINEERING THEATRE / ST. PETERSBURG** **AND DMITRY KRYMOV / MOSCOW**

One of the most notable developments on the present-day European stage is the impetuous bloom of the visual theatre. This bloom calls up that moment in the evolution of visual arts when figurative painting gave way to the non-figurative one. When the artist became focused not on interpretation of a well-known subject, not on penetrating into the psychology of the person being portrayed, not even on mastery, with which a painter depicts a drop of water frozen on the surface of an apple, but on the correlation of colors and shapes. In theatre these were supplemented by sounds and bodies. In the visual theatre the lights, the mise-en-scene, the change of the backdrop color from blue to sky-blue carry no less meaning than a significant turn of the storyline where the word is assigned the key role. The treatment of the original source (if there is any such source) is very free. It is a kind of theatrical footnotes to all too well-known stories. More often than not these productions have no original literary sources. Neither are there rigidly contoured characters or a legible storyline. The productions take shape in the course of rehearsals, or are composed while rehearsing. In Russia with its traditional logo-centrism such crossbreed opuses, made on the borderline between theatre and visual arts, theatre and modern dance, theatre and circus were long reluctant to blossom wildly.

The companies performing in this style were few and far between, the most well-known of them no doubt being AXE Engineering Theatre. Essentially AXE consists of two artists (who are also directors, actors, authors of plays) – Maxim Isayev and Pavel Semchenko. The main characters of their shows are usually most ordinary objects that every one of us comes across in our everyday lives. The makers of the Engineering Theatre are animating them before our eyes. The alchemic nature of this theatre is a bit akin to the story of "black magician" doctor Faustus who once became a personage of the Isayev-Semchenko play. And it became crystal-clear at once that this story is an ideal literary material for the Engineering Theatre.

Suffice it to mention the scene with four imposing folios out of which in turns water is pouring, fire is bursting, earth is waking up and dust from the books is soaring in the air. But in all their other stagings, having nothing to do with Faustus, Semchenko and Isayev invariably engage in materializing spirits, searching for the philosophers' stone and extracting mystical knowledge as a result of scientific experimentation. Their best compositions, like the widely acclaimed *Sine Loco* are visual alliterations on the motif of life and death. In these works the theatrical alchemists turn performance into a mystery that one aspires to clue, but it always remains a mystery.

For quite a while AXE were perhaps the only players in the field of the visual theatre. However in the past three years the logo-centrist Russia was brought low once and for all as a result of the onslaught of this theatre. This theatre now exists not only in St. Petersburg, renowned for its underground traditions, but also in Moscow and, what seems especially important, at Anatoli Vasiliev's School of Dramatic Art. Its author is Dimitri Krymov whose name not so long ago was invariably provided with specification – "the son of outstanding Russian director Anatoli Efros". Now specifications are quite irrelevant. Krymov is Krymov and probably one of the most notable figures in the space of the modern Russian theatre.

In his productions everything drawn can come to life and living people slightly resemble puppets. In them the reality is as changeable as in animated cartoons. Something of this kind used to be done by Tadeuz Cantor, but his scenic pieces were born out of the recollections of childhood. In Krymov's case they are born out of the yearning for the world culture. This culture, however, is transfigured by the fantasy that is not unlike the fantasy of a child. It is symptomatic that the title of one of his recent productions, *Donkey Hot* by Sir Vantes, sounds like childish distortions of odd words.

In one of Krymov's best productions, *Demon – View from Above*, the world culture, as well as our sinful earth with its landscapes, mountains and seas, our no less sinful lives with their sorrows and joys are bird's-eye-views. The audience seated in the balconies around the arena are offered to view the world with the eyes of "the free son of the air" who travels in time and space without a helm or sails. The interchanging views from above call up multiple associations. Here are the sunflowers violently turning yellow as they were seen in Van Gogh's sickly imagination: like everything in this play they are born before our eyes out of materials at hand – vanilla plates, yellow gloves, graceful lines of stem painted black on the white. Hey Vincent, is it you buddy?

Here is the entire solar system with paper-made space bodies, fixed to metal "fishing rods". In an instant the space objects turn into snowflakes and this beautiful earth of ours becomes the foundation of a snowman who gives birth to a whimsical girl. The kids with snowballs once again turn into artists and try

to comfort her by tying up to her head, sticking out of the snow womb, now a tutu (dance baby!), then a fiddle and fiddlestick (play my dear!), and next a tub with blue water (take a swim, silly lassie!).

Finally here are the luminaries of the Russian classical literature. Lev Tolstoy climbs out of the freshly drawn *Yasnaya Polyana* and heads straight for the *Astapovo* railway station. Huge black Gogol with sad face is burning the second volume of *The Dead Souls*. A Cossack fur cap and felt coat with ammo pouches made of soft-tip pens are attached to the portrait of Mikhail Lermontov. Nobody and nothing seems to be missing. The view from above is just perfect.

There is certainly something demonic in this overwhelming impulse to fly up. Like there is something devilish in the very act of artistic creation, as well as in the desire to challenge Creator with one's demiurgic urge.

And yet I am asking myself: is it with Demon's eyes that we see this entire heavenly beautiful world with sunflowers, snowflakes, Pirosmalian feasts and Chagal's flying lovers? It seems that these are the eyes of another flying creature. For Lermontov's world is often seen from the above and not necessarily with the eyes of the Demon.

*"At midnight an angel was crossing
the sky,*

And quietly he sang;

*The moon and the stars and the concourse
of clouds*

Paid heed to his heavenly song..."

These early verses of the sixteen-years-old genius seem to be more befitting to the production of *Demon* than the lines of the like-named poem.

The world in Krymov's opus is seen from above, but is not looked down at. And *Demon* always looks down at people and things. The cold and contemptuous alienation is present in him even when he is in love. The view of the Angel is different. It reflects acceptance rather than tearing away of being. And it seems that this view is closer to Krymov.

Like many practitioners of the visual theatre he places earthly impressions into the un-earthly spaces, thereby making for the theatre to retrieve the metaphysical dimension that was in a large measure lost by it.

His frantic experimentation with forms calls up the ontological scale of the last century's avant-garde that was until recently lost without a trace by visual arts and that at the new turn of cultural history has showed itself in a transfigured shape. And this makes one hopeful that the entropy being so much talked

about in relation to the modern arts is after all not all-powerful. The playful postmodernist games with the classics ventured by some makers of the visual theatre reflects the love for God's world, once lost in the European culture and nowadays re-emerging in all its magnitude.