



# RUSSIAN NOTEBOOK '18-'19

from Yury Urnov

#6

9/18

Labor Day 2018

## Dear Friends,

In this issue of the [RUSSIAN NOTEBOOK](#), Yury opens up Boris Yukhananov's ELECTROTREATRE STANISLAVSKY for us. His interview with Christina Matvienko keenly explores this fresh, hopeful, phenomenon in the current, troubled Russian theatre scene.

Yukhananov and the ELECTRO first got on my radar when John Freedman started talking about this dreamer who had taken on the moribund Stanislavsky Theatre on Tverskaya street (Gorki ulitza). Since I first went to Moscow some 20+ years ago, I think I was in that theatre once.

Not on my radar.

But then something happened: Boris Yukhananov!

John watched Boris closely—and shared how he got control of the theatre, hired actors, and built rehearsal studios first—*then* began the much needed renovations of the performance and public spaces. They worked for a year with actors, and finally opened with three major European directors: Theodore Terzopoulos, Romeo Castellucci and Heiner Goebbels.

So I was not totally surprised when John shared with me his plan to leave his long-time critic's perch at the Moscow Times to work with Boris and the ELECTRO. A deeply felt move to be a part of something very important.

Christina's conversation with Yury in this issue offers us multiple windows into this grand experiment.

### **YURY URNOV IS BACK IN THE USA**

I'd also like to take this opportunity to welcome Yury and his wife, Tanya back to the US.

[Yury](#) is indeed back, and will be working even more closely with me and CITD—he has taken on a larger CITD project and returns as the new Associate Director of CITD.



We started our professional collaboration in 2000 in Moscow. Our work together has taken us to St. Petersburg, Perm, Yekaterinburg, Chelyabinsk, Vladikavkaz, Omsk, Kostroma, and Nizhniy Novgorod. Also, to Hungary, Poland, Estonia, Bulgaria, Slovakia and Uganda. And San Francisco, Austin, New Orleans, Washington, New York, Philadelphia, Telluride, New Haven, Chicago, Boston, Ashfield, and Baltimore.

He's ready to take on this leadership role with me.

And, he's busy. He opens a new production, Lola Pierson's [PUTIN ON ICE](#)—a co-production of Single Carrot Theatre and Acme Corporation in Baltimore on 14 September. He then moves to the Wilma Theatre, directing Anne Washburn's [MR. BURNS, a Post-Electric Play](#), opening 26 October in Philadelphia. Both productions run for a month.

And last week, he began his Visiting Assistant Professorship in [Towson University's theatre program](#).

### **THE CITD TEAM FOR 2018/19**

I'd also like to introduce you to the folks now part of the CITD team for 2018-19. A great group. No one works full-time. All are working theatre artists. All have a deep commitment to the region and the work of CITD.



[Susan Stroupe](#) is taking on coordination of three projects soon to be launched. She has a long history with CITD, having held one of the earlier CITD fellowships. Originally from Atlanta, she came to Baltimore for the Towson University MFA Theatre program, and ended up staying in the city, working primarily as a director.

[bakerartist.org/portfolios/susan-stroupe](http://bakerartist.org/portfolios/susan-stroupe)

[Jarod Hanson](#) is the CITD 2018-20 Fellow and incoming Theatre MFA artist at Towson University. His background has been training and creating with my old friend Kari Margolis of the Margolis Method Center Int'l and MB ADAPTORS Company. He has toured and taught internationally. He is currently doing the movement work for Yury's *PUTIN ON ICE*. He helped create the Margolis Center in Barcelona two years ago.

[www.StJustus.com](http://www.StJustus.com)



[Lindsey Griffith](#) pitches in on multiple projects, and works with Carol, organizing the ever growing CITD archives. A writer and performer from Kansas City, she graduated from Towson's MFA program last June. She has had two tours of her latest piece, *HORSE PEOPLE* (East Coast and Mid-West) and will be showcasing at the HIGHFEST in Yerevan, Armenia in October.

[www.Lindsey.zone](http://www.Lindsey.zone)

[Carol Baish](#), pictured here with our new pup, Lulu, started out with a MA in English Literature from the University of Maryland. She was the managing editor of the *American Scholar* until I talked her into joining me and running off to join the circus (The Theatre Project), where she was managing director for my time there (1971-91). We have been professional and life partners for 47 years.



I am very grateful to be working with this talented and generous group.

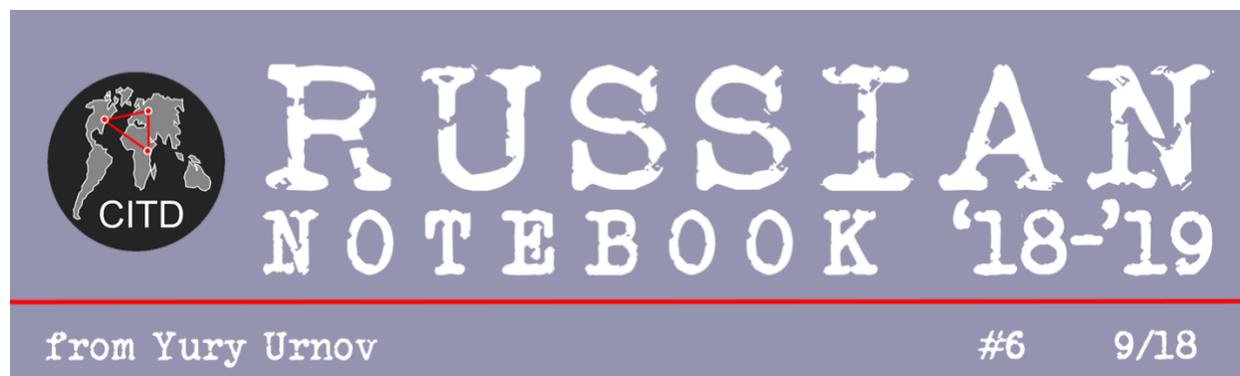
Stay strong, my friends,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Philip Arnoult".

**Philip Arnoult**  
founder & director



A final word of thanks to our outgoing CITD Fellow, 2016-18, Julia Katz. Julia was critical in getting the CITD publications up and running. She will stay in the area, having just taken on two new positions. One, at George Mason University, and two, marriage to Will Rubens two days ago.



## Dear Friends,

My year-long Russia trip is over. The day we publish this issue I will already be back on US soil, to do all this exciting work Philip writes about in his opening letter.

Though I travelled dozens of towns in Russia, saw over 100 productions, directed two full shows and a number of workshops, yet my strongest impression of this year was para-theatrical: Alexei Malobrodsky, the former managing director of the Gogol Center, was arrested in June 2017; the arrest of Kirill Serebrennikov followed two months later. As I'm writing this, the Moscow court is discussing extension of pre-trial procedures through October 19.



A lot of people, me included, were expecting the actual trial to begin right after the last whistle of the final game of the Soccer Cup in Moscow. It is hard to explain how big of an event this soccer-month was for my country, but it is even harder to imagine how much Russia changed with the beginning of the tournament: police officers were smiling to strangers and even tried speaking foreign languages to them; in 11 cities hosting games of the Cup regular people were suddenly allowed to behave freely, celebrate, drink in public, bathe in fountains, and sing loud songs; sex in public was considered a minor administrative offence.

In a word, the impression was one of the Emerald City, while we all knew too well: single-use glasses had to go into a trashcan after July 15. A scent of impending disaster had been increased by many contrasts: the \$5000 soccer tickets and the country average retirement pension of \$250; happy crowds in the ornate Moscow center and the then fifty and now over one hundred days of Oleg Sentsov's hunger-strike in a Russian prison; beautiful young international couples on the streets of our cities and the crazy orthodox article in the top-popular Russian newspaper titled "The time of whores: Russian women disgrace their country and themselves during the Mundial." So too many historic parallels – from Marie Antoinette to the Berlin Olympics 1936 – none of them correct, yet making me ask: what's approaching? The war? The revolution? The wave of political terror? Or another narrow escape? Folks, seriously, I don't believe I'm exaggerating, it smells as bad as I can remember it did in my lifetime!

And yet the Gogol Center trial was postponed even after the end of the Cup in July and again in August. Even though now I will be spending most of my time on this side of the Atlantic, I promise to find a way to keep informing you about the Gogol Center Case developments.

Interestingly, the theater I'm writing about in this issue fits the contrasting picture described above just too well. Electrotheatre Stanislavsky is a piece of pure art and artistic luxury in the midst of the political disaster happening in Russia today. Watching shows at Electro felt like visiting a different planet, while Google Maps kept insisting I was one mile NW of the Kremlin wall.

Electrotheatre Project managed to bring together a lot of extremely interesting artists, critics, and theater activists. I know quite a few of them personally, and I know they've never belonged to any kind of institutionalized theatrical structure or aspired to belong to one. Contemporary dancers and choreographers Alberts Alberts and Sasha Konnikova, stage-designer and technical director Natali Avdonina, critic and theater activist John Freedman – all of them used to be kind of “too freelance” for the fulltime job, yet all of them found their artistic home here. The list is actually much longer, and this tells me something about Electrotheatre and its artistic director Boris Yukhananov: he managed to create a theater which Moscow was lacking. I would call this place – the harbor for theater idealists.

At least one of these theater idealists most of you know very well – John Freedman has been the patriot and the promoter of the Russian theater in the US for decades, and the key Russian partner of CITD for about the same time. After finishing his 23 year-long marathon as a theater critic for the Moscow Times, in 2015 he became an assistant to Yukhananov on the international activities of the Electro, which in and of itself should be considered a great credential for Boris.

Yet in this particular issue, I'm interviewing another theater idealist - Christina Matvienko - my old-time friend, the well-known theater critic, and the curator of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre's School of Contemporary Viewers and Listeners.

Below she explains to me the difference between artistic escapism and aesthetical resistance.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'M. Matvienko' with a stylized flourish at the end.

## CHRISTINA MATVIENKO & ELECTROTHEATRE STANISLAVSKY

The Russian theater field is extremely demanding to its experts – it's very hard to build a reputation, and it's too easy to ruin one.

I don't think I can name more than a dozen people around the country whose expertise the majority of professionals will trust. Christina certainly belongs to this dozen. Three times she's been a Golden Mask Festival advisor/selector, curated the Russian Case program twice, served as an art-director of the



New Drama Festival for 3 years in a row. It is also important to mention that she became a well-known expert by the age of 30, which by Russian standards is too-too young. But even more importantly - she wasn't the only wunderkind in the field; Elena Kovalskaya and Pavel Rudnev both belong to the same generation.

The possible explanation for this phenomenon is that the Russian theater field was changing very rapidly in the past two decades. Since the Iron Curtain fell and Russian artists gained access to European theater ideas, the understanding of what is good, new, and progressive, changed a lot. For the same reason, some of the best experts of the previous epoch lost their professional relevance and status. New times demanded a different level of professional awareness, new expertise, and – if you will – different artistic taste.

This revolutionary quick change of values affected the very role of the theater critic in Russian theater. Some of them moved into the field of more democratic journalism, writing for popular *Time Out* kind of magazines (actually both Christina Matvienko and Elena Kovalskaya also did it for a few years); few stayed with the thick and specific professional editions. Others found themselves on the edge of producing and educating – splitting their time between curating various projects, and lecturing on contemporary art across the country. Christina belongs to the latter group.

In my previous issue I promised to write about Elena Gremina in more detail, and Christina happens to be an expert on this sad matter as well; she used to be Elena's daughter-in-law.

While mostly this interview is about The Electrotheatre, we also discuss the Gogol Center case. I'm interrupting the interview with some pictures, videos, and short texts about 12 productions I've seen in Russia in the past two months.

## INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTINA MATVIENKO

### AESTHETICAL RESISTANCE

**YURY:** Watching Electrotheatre shows, I can't avoid impression of the "feast in time of plague." I'm seeing beautiful, aesthetically perfect productions, while – figuratively speaking - "bombs are falling from the sky" all around. And I don't at all mean, you guys are doing a wrong thing; I'm just trying to understand how such an aesthetical oasis is even possible in the context of the quite gruesome political reality of our country?

**CHRISTINA:** For about 10 years or more, I used to be exclusively interested in the ability of theater to react quickly and sharply to social and political events; because I had and I still have a naïve dream - art can somewhat change life. Yet, even though I love straightforward statements, I don't mean them to be the only way possible to make life-changing art. This is me, this is my point of view.

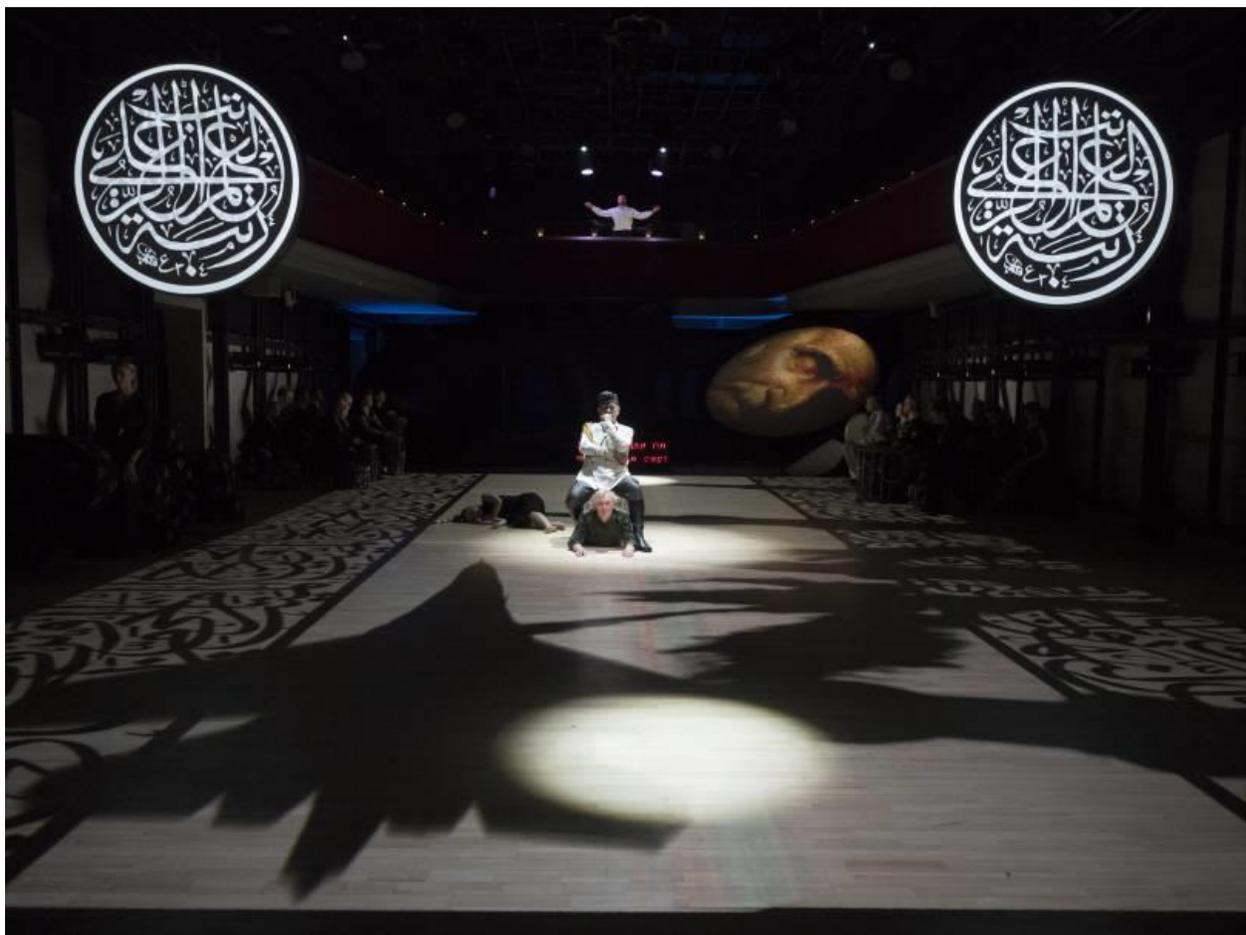


*Boris Yukhananov's version of Maeterlinck's Blue Bird, based on both the play and the childhood memories of the two leading actors - Alefina Konstantinova, Vladimir Korenev. Performed in three parts and three nights. Pictures from part 2: Journey. For the [DETAILED VIDEO TRAILER CLICK HERE](#)*

Now, let's look at Boris Yukhananov, the artistic director of the theater, the one who made all these radical changes at Electro. As an artist, he grew up in the late-Soviet underground, unofficial, alternative culture; he went through the Anatoly Vasiliev's schooling; so his aesthetics and his artistic habits are deeply rooted in the countercultural strategies of that epoch.

And even while he is very well informed and aware of what is going on in "real life" and in politics, his artistic nature is aesthetically opposite to what Mikhail Ugarov used to call "horizontal art" (*documentary based, socially pro-active, aesthetically poor and bold – YU*). He is not a fan of such art, he never made it, and he never will.

But it doesn't mean his art isn't political at all. Go see his production of *The Constant Principle* – it's about terrorism taking over the world, it's about total war and about where it can take the world. Yet, aesthetically it certainly has nothing to do with Theater Doc.



*The Constant Principle, a play in three acts, two cemeteries, and one concert. Performed in two nights. Directed by **Boris Yukhananov**.  
For [VIDEO CLICK HERE](#).*

**YURY:** But his other productions, or when you look at the works his students make...

**CHRISTINA:** I won't argue, there are plenty of artists in this theater, including some of Boris's students, who really don't care about the immediate reaction to the events of the bigger world; it's just beyond their artistic interest.

**YURY:** I used to consider aestheticism and escapism the tools of the cultural protest of the late 80s; when socialist realism demanded the artist to be socially pro-active, and when doing a different kind of art already was a...

**CHRISTINA:** Political gesture...

**YURY:** You know, while Taganka Theater was fighting the regime with the same tools regime was using...

**CHRISTINA:** Right, they were working in the same aesthetical paradigm...

**YURY:** Other artists were protesting by shifting the paradigm, by creating an alternative battlefield, by building an aesthetic alternative...

**CHRISTINA:** Exactly, this was the mission of the marginal art then – to show people an alternative way of thinking, opposite to both the official mainstream and to the Taganka-kind of theater, at which all Communist Party leaders were attending every opening, by the way. These marginals then created an alternative more dangerous than Taganka, because they've created an actually alternative universe. A few days ago Marina Davydova (*the famous Russian critic – YU*) was speaking here in our theater about how aesthetics can be political, how aesthetics can resist this worldwide conservative turn. This is why I believe in the political effectiveness of contemporary opera.



*Performed in the brand new 70-seat space of Electro, the two-night contemporary opera piece Maniozis and Maniozis-2 was directed and composed by **Alexander Belousov**. The story, roughly based off *The Ethics by Spinoza*, and – quoting Electrotheatre website: “leading us to the conclusion that the acquisition of knowledge comes by way of mania, or obsession.” Similarly, the name of the project comes from the combination of words “mania” and “gnosis.”*



Maniozis and Maniozis-2

AUDIENCES FOR COMPLICATED THEATRE.

**YURY:** Here's another thing, and here's why I'm inclined to believe your argument... I come to your theater, and I see an extremely attentive audience. I just saw *Orpheus*. Even though probably there were a lot of friends there and a lot of comps, the level of the audience's attention, and of what looked like understanding of the extremely complicated theatrical text, was amazing; the level of agreement on the very challenging theater code between the stage and the house. How is this possible? Is this about the very narrow segment of the intellectual Moscow audience? Where do these people even come from?

**CHRISTINA:** It's not as easy as you make it sound. *Orpheus* was kind of a lucky coincidence. The size of the project itself, the number of people involved in it, helped provide quite impressive audience numbers.



Orphic Games Punk Macrame is a truly colossal experiment – 34 MFA-student graduate productions, each an hour long, united into the singular theater piece by the theme, the set, and some masterful work of **Boris Yukhananov**. All pieces are based on the Orpheus myth and its various reflections in drama, and each of them – a unique and inventive variation of it. As post-modernistic as it is, the 6 day marathon reflects perfectly the life of the basic myth in the collective mind of the new generation of artists. The list of performers holds about 150 names.



**YURY:** Kind of a pyramid?

**CHRISTINA:** Exactly. But it's not just that. It's also the result of all the work done here since 2013, as well as of the work of our predecessors in the field of experimental theater in Moscow, such as the Meyerhold Center and the Gogol Center. Our niche is relatively small, but we are strongly connected.

Even so, when it comes to the most challenging material, like contemporary experimental opera, we run out of audience pretty quickly. Yet we keep promoting these productions, because they are in the very avant-garde of theater right now; these young people are the smartest, the best informed, and the most integrated into the European artistic process.

They help our theater develop. Actually, one of our most successful projects was when we brought Alvin Lucier here. This was the best connection between the stage and the house I've ever seen.



Director **Romeo Castellucci**

the productions are so different, it's really hard to figure out the average. For example, we have the show directed by Romeo Castellucci, by the way, it's the only one he did in Russia: *Human Use of Human Beings* based on the famous fresco by Giotto. It takes over the whole theater – lobby, mainstage, everywhere; it can only accommodate 100 people; and we only performed it once during this past season.

**YURY:** Why only one performance?

**CHRISTINA:** We have to close the theater completely for over a week to build this show.

**YURY:** So how many people show up?

**CHRISTINA:** Well, we can seat a maximum of 230 in our main space. The smaller stage holds 70. And we are not always sold-out. Plus, we hold educational programs and gatherings in the lobby – for between 50 and a hundred. Rimini Protokoll attracted 100 people when we did a meeting with them; Yukhananov interviewing Andrey Moguchy (*one of the top Russian stage directors; AD of the St. Petersburg Bolshoy Drama Theater - YU*) brought in 150. Mundi Theater Lab's seminars on theater theory attract only 30 or 40 people, but this is the supremely professional and intellectual audience. But we certainly fail often as well – it's when only 5 or 7 people show up, and we wonder why did we even bother?

**YURY:** Alright, and when you say 230 seats is your house – how many showings of the production can you sell?

**CHRISTINA:** It's actually quite hard to evaluate. We are sort of in between the repertoire and the project systems – we usually perform the same production 4 or 5 nights in a row, once every three months or so. But



Rehearsing *Human Use of Human Beings*. For [VIDEO CLICK HERE](#)

ELECTROTHEATRE PROJECT

**YURY:** Okay, now I believe we owe some explanation about what is the Electrotheatre Stanislavsky project. Before 2013 it used to be one of the regular Moscow repertoire theaters, it had challenging years, it had boring years...

**CHRISTINA:** It had commercial years...

**YURY:** It had an interesting moment when Vladimir Mirzoev was the Artistic Director here in the 1990s (*well-known Russian stage and film director - YU*). But what happened in 2013?

**CHRISTINA:** In 2012-2013, Sergey Kapkov, the liberal and the reformer, then Moscow minister of culture, was trying to breathe new life into the city theater scene, to integrate theaters into the Moscow urban landscape. This is when Gogol Theater was transformed into the new Gogol Center with Kirill Serebrennikov at the helm; this is also when the City held a competition for the position of AD at this theater.

**YURY:** I believe this was actually the first open competition in the history of Russian theater.

**CHRISTINA:** Probably. At least the first one for real.



Max Black or 62 Ways of Supporting the Head with a Hand, based on the notebooks of **Paul Valery, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Max Black**. Staging and composition by **Heiner Goebbels**. An attempt of the flagman of contemporary European directing to stage the cognitive process itself, to materialize the inner world of the philosopher's brain, dissecting and remodeling reality. A beautiful verbal-musical-lighting-special effects polyphony, balancing on the edge of seriousness and satire. At times – a philosophical tractate, at times – the mockery of intellectualism. Feels like Goebbels is full of both admiration and irony about the abilities of the human brain. Click [HERE FOR A DETAILED VIDEO TRAILER](#).



Max Black or 62 Ways of Supporting the Head with a Hand

Boris Yukhananov was among the applicants, and won the competition with a very clear program: he wanted to close the theater for a year and do a full renovation using private money provided by Serguei Adoniev – Russian businessman and philanthropist; to get rid of the restaurant taking over the lobby; to create a zone open to the city – the front and the backyard. He decided to get rid of all running productions, and to build a new repertoire created by important European directors (Romeo Castellucci, Theodore Terzopoulos, Heiner Goebbels), young Russian directors, and himself. He promised to work personally with each member of the old company, and to make decisions about these people staying with the theater or leaving it. He insisted on creating an educational lobby program, serving our theater a sort of intellectual safety bag; the goal here is to prepare audiences to “read” and understand complicated theater “languages,” to create intellectual context for our productions.

And in the next two years he fulfilled all his promises. Terzopoulos’s *Bacchae* opened the new theater, it was our first show; then it was Castellucci and it was Goebbels. If anything, a strong European level of directing.





The *Bacchae* by Euripides, directed by **Theodoros Terzopoulos** in my opinion is one of the most successful productions of the famous Greek outside his country. A number of companies across the globe now invite Theodoros to direct, and - often even more importantly - to share his technology of actors' body and voice training. Yukhananov smartly invited Terzopoulos to direct the first project of the *Electro* after reconstruction. Beyond creating a powerful production, Theodoros managed to ignite the energy of the company and to "turn on" their physicality – which is obvious even in the shows produced years after *The Bacchae*. It is exciting to see how the psychological schooling of Russian actors finds physical and vocal ways to manifest itself in this production. In my opinion, the absolute best of the cast is my old time friend and colleague **Elena Morozova** in the part of Dionysus (1<sup>st</sup> row right photo) – she manages to appropriate Terzopoulos highly-stylized language and to combine it with the humane emotionality of the great Russian actor; in her case the stylization is full of life and humor. Click [HERE FOR VIDEO TRAILER](#).

At the same time Boris started two huge projects of his own: *The Golden Ass* vaguely after Apuleius, and then *Orpheus*...

**YURY:** Just making sure for our readers – *Orpheus* like *Golden Ass*, is not a single production, it's about 36 hours of stage work, presented in 6 days...

**CHRISTINA:** Right, this is Yukhananov's project he did with his students, with his Lab.

**YURY:** This is the MFA group, correct?

**CHRISTINA:** Correct, the official name is "The Workshop of Individual Stage Direction" ...

**YURY:** And it's something like 100 students?

**CHRISTINA:** Yes, it is. It's a hell lot of students. The Workshop is formally separate from theater, but they are here all the time.

**YURY:** And then there are young Russian directors not belonging to the Lab?

**CHRISTINA:** Yes, it's Muravitsky, Kviatkovsky, Vytopov with *The Seagull*, and it's Grigoryan with *Tartuffe*...



Part 1. CATWALK. Directed by **Yury Muravitsky**



Part 2. IMPROVISATION. Directed by **Yury Kvyatkovsky**



Part 3. THE BAR. Directed by **Kirill Vytoptov**

*My number one choice – probably defined by inclination to the directorial theater – was the three-part Chekhov’s Seagull with the motto “New Forms.”*

*Three directors doing one act each, and also each performing the part of Konstantin in one of the other two acts; quite a self-deprecating idea by the way.*

*It was a special kind of joy - seeing three very different approaches to Chekhov in one night, slightly reminding me of the academia-experience, yet done in professional environment.*

*The first act, directed by **Yury Muravitsky**, is a catwalk fashion show. The actors are somewhat detached from their characters, and wear their identities like they do costumes. The aggressive presentational style helps reveal parallels between the Chekhovian text and contemporary reality.*

*The second, done by **Yury Kvyatkovsky**, is a risky and refreshing improvisation with only a few plot pivot-points rehearsed. The actors so obviously and bravely balance on the edge of failure, that the audience at some point starts cheering for them wholeheartedly.*

*In the third part, directed by **Kirill Vytoptov**, the story is set at a bar merging into a massive writer’s table. This segment is extremely stylized and each character of the Seagull is defined through a contemporary cultural hero – from Marilyn Monroe to Albert Einstein; while light, sound, and color scape is evidently quoting Twin Peaks textures. Contemporary parallels connect us to the distant world of Chekhovian characters by demonstrating their equivalents in modern life and mythology. For [VIDEO TRAILER](#) [CLICK HERE](#).*

*Another radical conceptual directorial experiment was that of **Philipp Grigoryan** on Moliere's 'Tartuffe'. Like many Moscow critics, I've found it smart, brave and exact, with probably the exception of the very final scene.*

*Philip turns Tartuffe into Grigori Rasputin, Orgon – into the last Russian Emperor Nicolas II, and Mariane - into 4 of his daughters, and so on.*

*The main impression - smart solution, taking into consideration how deeply the Orthodox Church is being integrated into the Putin's power-structure today, and how similar it is to what was going on in Russia 100 years ago: all of a sudden, conflicts in the play start making sense, and the satire starts feeling acute.*

*For the final act, Grigoryan makes a slip-flop – both stylistically and physically speaking – two halves of the audience exchange places, now looking at the action from opposite tribunes. The time/epoch shifts as well – now we see the characters in either their post-mortem trip through history, or a few days before execution, or – most likely – both simultaneously.*

*The one scene not fitting so perfectly into the concept, is Moliere's resolution of the conflict – with the kind King, punishing Evil and rewarding Good. Yet, by that moment, the production is so deep in the land of metaphors, that audiences excuse this directorial flaw, and leave the show emotionally surprised and intellectually challenged. Great brave work, Philipp! Click [HERE FOR THE VIDEO TEASER](#).*



*Orgon-Nikolas II family*



*Tartuffe-Rasputin*



*Dorine and Orgon*

ELENA GREMINA

**YURY:** Now. The very different topic I can't not discuss with you today. Elena Gremina passed away very recently. In my previous issue Max Kurochkin talks about Ugarov with great warmth and respect, sadly now it's Elena's turn...



*Elena Gremina 1956 - 2018*

It's really not the best year for Russian theater, and we will keep weeping, but beyond weeping, can we formulate – what was this main thing Elena did? Together with Misha, on her own – what was that? What kind of a revolution? Why now, after they are both gone, do we all feel that major link in the chain of Russian theater is missing, hopefully only temporarily? What did Elena invent?

**CHRISTINA:** Before Elena it was almost impossible for a stranger, for a non-professional, for a “barbarian” with no degree in writing, to get into theater. It used to be a very narrow doorway; Elena made it much broader. And this is exactly what all the critics were blaming Theater Doc for in the early years. “All these people are unprofessional,” – they were saying. Presnyakov Brothers didn't study theater, but were performing on stage...

**YURY:** Kurochkin graduated as a historian...

**CHRISTINA:** Klavdiev, all the Togliatti people – for the professional world they were aliens. Nowadays, people like Oleg Loevsky mostly worry about the next step – about how to make bigger theaters produce new plays, and how to make new plays producible. Misha and Elena didn't care so much about that.

**YURY:** Sounds like just a different stage of things...

**CHRISTINA:** Right, all I'm saying is they didn't care too much about careers, about productions, about budgets – all they wanted, was to create an ideal open space for uncultivated talent to show its worth. And Doc became such an ideal place.

**YURY:** Got it.

**CHRISTINA:** They were very talented in discovering talent.

And then there was the human component – their personal attitude to politics, to people in general: homeless, victims of terrorist attacks, prisoners... They naturally couldn't bear the State suppressing individual, individuality. And they were attracting everybody's attention to these issues.

**YURY:** “Look here, people, this is totally fucked up! See how fucked up this is?”

**CHRISTINA:** Exactly. They were like: “pay attention, speak up, you can't just stay silent!” And they spoke up.

And there was another, specifically Elena's thing – unselfishness. She was able to forget her own interest; she wasn't promoting herself; she wasn't trying to put her name tag on things Doc was doing. Misha's artistic nature was more egoistic, but not Elena's.

Finally, her actual real freedom of speech, real liberty, courage to speak openly and straightforwardly about all these social and political matters.

**YURY:** Probably this is the most important part of her talent? I mean, most of the theater artists in Russia consider themselves freethinkers, yet, when it comes to saying things out loud from stage, we start inventing excuses like: “art should speak in metaphors,” “art of a clear social or political message is no art no more,” “art has to stay allegorical” ... I mean, it's partially true, but aren't we also still under the influence of the Soviet taboo? Kurochkin insists it's just our own fear speaking; that this is how we defend our self-restraint, how we excuse our own silence. That this is our way to stay on the safe side without losing self-respect.

**CHRISTINA:** I remember very well the interview with Henrietta Janovskaya and Kama Ginkas – wonderful people and artists. But when they were asked about the Chechen War, they said something like: “why speak about the war now? Let's wait till it's over, then we can evaluate it more objectively.”

**YURY:** Again, I don't blame them for this position...

**CHRISTINA:** Neither do I...

**YURY:** But Doc was the only one different – they wanted to say things straight out, with no allegories, and this was really a new thing in the Post-Soviet theater.

Being part of the family you saw Elena closer than anybody else... How did she feel about Doc? Was she proud? Was she satisfied?



**CHRISTINA:** When I'm reading all the obituaries now... *Vedomosti* newspaper says – Doc was the main event of the Russian Theater of the 21<sup>st</sup> century... We were yelling about it for many years on every corner, but only a few believed us.

They say it now, when Misha and Elena are dead, when everybody wants Doc, misses Doc, tries to be like Doc; when all these critics now sing glory... the same ones who used to give no shit about Doc...

Elena wanted recognition, wanted acknowledgment of their work... she wasn't showing it in public, but she was longing for it...

All these wonderful words should have been said much earlier, while they were alive.



*Elena Gremina with her husband and partner Mikhail Ugarov*

GENDER

**YURY:** Chris, you're the second woman I interview here. This is my 6<sup>th</sup> Issue, 4 were about men. I mean, for Americans this is a serious issue. All the theaters I work with there, each and every of them is headed by a woman now.

**CHRISTINA:** Revanche?

**YURY:** And for most men I like such revanche is acceptable.

**CHRISTINA:** How did it work? What was the power that made it happen? It couldn't just have happened on its own, right?

**YURY:** Generations. Project-thinking: fighting cholesterol, fighting inequality – they come up with a project, set goals, and try to reach them.

How do you feel as a woman working in Russian theater? Do you feel inequality?

**CHRISTINA:** I never feel any inequality, and I don't think about it. Whenever there is a seminar with American participants, they always bring up gender issues, and we - Russians and East-Europeans - we never know what to say. I don't know, maybe it's different in politics or in business, but in theater at least... There are plenty of conflicts obviously, I fight with men, I fight with women, but I can't recall a moment when my gender played any part in this. I remember being suppressed at work by men, but I don't believe gender was ever a reason.

Neither do I use my gender to manipulate men, to get something I need; I communicate quite openly with both men and women. Sometimes I choose to stay silent and wait, instead of going into open fight – I don't know, does this count? No, I really don't know and don't feel gender inequality. Probably because I'm not an artist? I'm actually quite rough, and I hate it when women spend half-an-hour talking bullshit during an important meeting. I think I turn into a man then; I start following the standards of male-behavior: I get mad, and I want more structure.

**YURY:** Jesus Christ!

**CHRISTINA:** What?

**YURY:** How about stage directors? How many female directors are there in Russia?

**CHRISTINA:** Very few.

**YURY:** Why?

**CHRISTINA:** It was the totalitarian mindset of our star stage directors since Soviet times. Because they also teach, and they chose students they want to teach, and they chose men. It's the filter built on the initial, academia level.



Songs from *Oblivion* based on Yue Dong's novel *A Supplement to the Journey to the West, or, The Tower of Myriad Mirrors*. Written and directed by **Inna Dulerain**, and performed by an all-female international cast in English with Russian subtitles. The story is of a woman in depression becoming a participant of a TV self-help show, and “trying on” different personalities, which is made possible by a new high-tech device. The device doesn't help, on the contrary – something weird starts happening to the TV-host and other participants of the show.

**YURY:** I have to give a short explanation here.

**CHRISTINA:** Alright.

**YURY:** We only have a few theater schools teaching directing, each of these accepts only 5 or 10 students every year. And very often the artistic directors of bigger theaters are also the ones who choose students for their groups at the Academy.

**CHRISTINA:** Right. All of these big directors were men, and they all chose male-students. It's Efros, and it's Vasiliev...

**YURY:** Goncharov...

**CHRISTINA:** Kheifits or Dodin, all of them, and there you go! It's their policy. They believe men can rule theater and any other collective better than women. This is probably just that.

**YURY:** This idea - of an academia filter, however obvious, never really crossed my mind...

**CHRISTINA:** This is the selection moment.

**YURY:** But this is exactly what inequality is!

**CHRISTINA:** Right, but it is not the only filter. Remember how they didn't want to admit young people, right out of school? Or how they only had so many rooms on campus, so most of students had to be from Moscow?

In any case, I don't believe any of these few Russian women-directors are driven by the idea of expressing their suppressed female nature through directing theater – this is probably an American idea only.

**YURY:** Well, part of that is probably historical... You know how Russian women in Soviet times were fighting for the right not to work, unlike American women...

**CHRISTINA:** (*Laughing*) Right, the history is too different...

But also, look at all our female bosses here – in business, even in theater; they are everywhere. Look at Maria Revyakina (*director of the Golden Mask festival – YU*), - she is a queen! Nobody is even close to where she is.

And, yes, I know a lot of women among poets and writers here, who really care about feminism and gender equality, but it strikes me how “partisan” their mindset is. (*Expression “partisan mindset” comes from the official Soviet vocabulary; it means a reliable person thinking exactly the way Communist Party teaches one to think -YU*). They all know exactly what is right and what is wrong, what is abuse and what is not... I'm not able to comprehend this, I really don't get it.

**YURY:** Christina, I will ask you to put your signature under this section of interview specifically, so American feminists don't kill me. But I believe it is important that you are saying this openly, this is how a lot of women think in Russia.



*Here comes a surprise. One of the most fun and most interesting experiences of the Electro repertoire for me was the production of Nilo Cruz's 2003 Pulitzer winning play Anna in the Tropics, directed by Alexander Ogaryov. I'm happy to say that production of this play was the result of John Freedman's project New American Plays for Russia, supported by Philip Arnoult's CITD, and the US Embassy in Moscow under the aegis of the U.S.-Russia Bilateral*

*Presidential Commission. Remember the times when our countries did cultural projects together? It wasn't even that long ago! What made me even happier – the production was really good. Ogaryov found ways to combine the Russian directorial approach with a very careful and tender attitude to Nilo's text, which is actually pretty hard, folks, trust me! The problem is – the Russian theater school is less word-driven than the American one. Most of the US actors know very well how to perform "with/through/by the text." Russians are taught to play subtext instead, where pronounced words are just "the top of the iceberg" of the character's life on stage; when applied straightforwardly – this can ruin American drama. Ogaryov manages to find a compromise – the text of the play is not dissected by the directorial analysis; Alexander lets it be (almost) sung to provide fluidity and deliver the atmosphere of the romantic southern story. Such fluidity is being supported by the physicality of the actors flying back and forth across an extremely wide stage. Together these patterns create the feeling of an endless carnival of life with a lot of drama happening in the very midst of it. A beautiful romantic production that is one of the bestsellers of Electro. A short though informative [VIDEO TRAILER CAN BE FOUND HERE](#).*



Anna in the Tropics

### KIRILL SEREBRENNIKOV

**YURY:** Each time I attend the court session of the Seventh Studio case, I keep wondering – why did they come after Kirill Serebrennikov? Why did they choose him specifically? I personally believe this trial to be a major crime against the Russian artistic field in general – but what was their logic?

**CHRISTINA:** We all know Kirill used to be very close to Vladislav Surkov, the grey cardinal of Russian social and cultural politics of the past decade. Behind this friendship was the idea: some people in the government understand contemporary art, are interested in modernization of the cultural industry, thus artists should collaborate with the educated segment in government, and work to change the system “from inside” ...

**YURY:** “From inside?” Instead of?

**CHRISTINA:** Instead of standing in opposition to the existing system. Changing the system through collaboration with it. Some people supported this approach – look at the Perm Cultural Revolution or at the Gogol Center. Others, like Elena Gremina, were saying then: “don’t do it, Surkov is using you to make his propaganda more efficient!”

So as soon as the political winds changed, as soon as the State lost interest in contemporary art, and as soon as Surkov admittedly became weaker – they came after Kirill, because he used to be the flagman, the central figure for the ideology of collaboration between the State and contemporary art.

**YURY:** So what is the message of this trial then - that the rules have changed? Six years ago their message was: we are ready for dialogue; we will support your collaboration with the system even if your politics doesn’t exactly agree with ours; you will have your small piece of artistic and political freedom in exchange for collaboration.

**CHRISTINA:** Sounds right.

**YURY:** So now it’s what? They announce the end of such dialogue, the end of collaboration?

**CHRISTINA:** Now they have new collaborators...

**YURY:** Like who?

**CHRISTINA:** Well, now we have the new big theater festival with Olga Egoshina and Marina Tokareva at the helm (*extremely conservative Russian theater critics – YU*), an alternative to the Golden Mask, supported by the Ministry of Culture. They’ve been attacking Golden Mask for a number of years, accusing it of supporting only liberal art...

**YURY:** Whatever that means... So what is the new order? What is the new cultural policy?

**CHRISTINA:** Their new document, the Basics of the Government Policy in Culture declares their core values openly: chastity, family, Russianness... Something like that? And this document also says: you want to do something different – don’t ask the State for the money, find private funding....

**YURY:** Which is a piece of hypocrisy, because the State works real hard to destroy any private financing of arts and politics...

**CHRISTINA:** Exactly...

**YURY:** And even when it’s all private like Theater Doc, they still find ways to destroy it...

**CHRISTINA:** You know, they probably sincerely believe that “classical” art is good, while contemporary art is just not part of their worldview... They don’t see reasons to support it. In times of financial and economic crisis, they prefer to support clear, obvious, safe things like these new carriages in the Moscow subway with portraits of Chekhov or Maly Theater actors from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The rest is just beyond their understanding... Maybe if there will be more money, if we will stop going into wars...



*Elena Morozova and Konstantin Bogomolov. The Magic Mountain.*

*I find it almost impossible to describe this show – ‘The Magic Mountain by Thomas Mann, directed by **Konstantin Bogomolov**. We went to see it in the Fall together with Teresa Eyring – she was doing some teaching in Moscow at this time. I told Teresa we should go see it, because Konstantin Bogomolov is on the very top of my list as a director, and **Elena Morozova** is one of the very best actors of Moscow.*

*The show turned out to be a masterful and marvelous provocation. It is 50 minutes long, short dialogues and poems all together take only 15 minutes (if so much), and all are about death. The rest is coughing. Elena coughs brutally for about 35 minutes. This was funny at first, after 15 minutes it became torture and absolutely, totally unbearable... But after a few more minutes my mind went on a trip – to the sanatorium in the middle of the Alps, full of dying and coughing people. Coughing, and coughing, and coughing, and dying. And even after they die – their coughing keeps filling the empty rooms of the sanatorium. The experience was transcendent. And I don’t know how Elena is able to cough for so long on stage and stay alive. Maybe, we should all thank Terzopoulos for that, I don’t know.*

*But what surprised me the most– nobody left during this show, not one person. Says something about the audiences of Electro, doesn’t it?*

WHY THEATER IS IMPORTANT?

**YURY:** I feel like theater in the US... it's like... toothpicks in the kitchen... good thing to have, but can manage without...

**CHRISTINA:** Americans are happy people...

**YURY:** Maybe. Why is it different in Russia? And is it still? Probably we just pretend it is while it isn't?

**CHRISTINA:** No, I don't think so...

**YURY:** Why then?

**CHRISTINA:** It's historical. Started with Peter the Great. He went to Vienna, saw some theater there that was not "for fun." Saw the potential of the theater to deliver political messages, to serve as a communicator. Since then authorities in Russia see theater as an important institution; it's both good and bad for the artists, but the government sure realizes that theater is important. This is speaking of the bond between authorities and artists.

But then there is also the bond between audiences and artists. As in France, theater used to be the place of "nation gathering" – in Russia, as Gogol put it: "theater is a pulpit from which much good can be spoken to the world." People approach this pulpit – come to the theater – and they want to hear "The Truth" from stage. They still do. Leo Dodin just toured Moscow with his Brechtian show. Very simple production, very "old-school", very well done, Aesopian language. Audiences were sitting there hanging on every word. Each and every word, Yury, full house of people. They were waiting for the verbal (or sub-textual) message, they received it, and they reacted to it. Same as in Soviet times.

**YURY:** Just because there is again no place for messages like that on television?

**CHRISTINA:** Right, only in theater. As in more liberal times, when we had some freedom on TV, some freedom of press, theater lost most of its popularity. Now when TV is nothing more but the source of lies, of simulacra, and of the war, theater is tall in the saddle again.

**YURY:** So, however low the general level of mutual trust in society is, in theater it is high? People believe these messages?

**CHRISTINA:** Yes, but only when it's Dodin or a similarly important figure.

**YURY:** So we are talking hierarchy again?

**CHRISTINA:** Certainly. One needs to get up high in the hierarchy...

**YURY:** And then whatever he says is considered important and super-credible... Alright – super-heroes and prophets, we know how this works... But what about contemporary art rejecting hierarchy of such sorts?

**CHRISTINA:** This is probably the main difference. Contemporary art is about horizontal not vertical connections; no prophets and no pulpits.

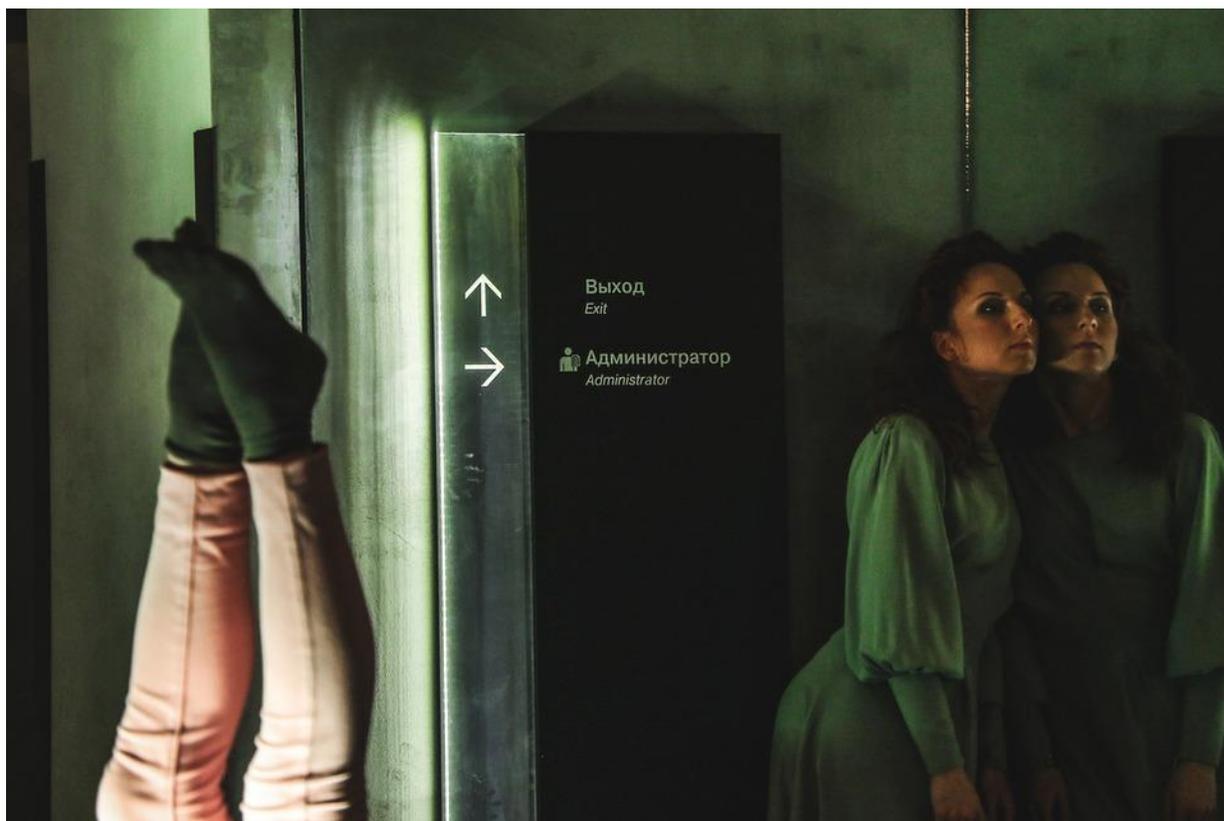
American performance artists of the 50s still have a great influence on contemporary art here. Most importantly, they've changed the role the audience plays in theater. It's a different level of freedom and of introspection for the audience member – watching a contemporary art piece one can feel free from the control of the state, of the conventional artistic and social models. Instead of yelling out loud: “Save Russia, go revolt!,” contemporary art creates a new type of communication, the new type of environment, alternative to the conservative trend and to social realism in art.

**YURY:** So, as an audience member, I spend 90 minutes in an alternative reality, in an alternative country.

**CHRISTINA:** Which makes you see how deeply wrong is your “real” reality, the country you live in... This has nothing to do with escapism - this is a challenge. It is not about immersing into illusion – it is about destroying all illusions. It is not about escaping from reality; it is about looking at reality critically.

**YURY:** Thank you, Christina. What a great arc from the beginning of our talk about Electrotheatre!

**CHRISTINA:** Thank you, Yury.



*The contemporary dance production Just So. Choreographers **Alberts Alberts** and **Alexandra Konnikova**. Theater is happening everywhere; this particular show takes over the cloak-room of Electro. I don't know how to write about dance, but this is a beautiful piece from my favorite choreographers, so please [WATCH THE TRAILER](#), it will make it a great ending for my Notebook.*

## Just one more thing!

I can't help but share one document with you...

Those following the Kirill Serebrennikov case remember the story with the ballet *Nureyev* at the Bolshoi Theater, which Kirill directed, designed, and wrote the libretto for. The theater suspended the opening when Kirill was arrested, but later they indeed opened it in directors' absentia with many politicians and close-to-Kremlin businessmen attending the show. There's been a lot of speculation since, will or will not Bolshoi keep the ballet in repertoire, and just recently the ticket sales were announced for the performances on October 20 and 21.

But before you decide to attend it, please get familiarized with the following:

### SPECIAL PROGRAM OF PRELIMINARY TICKETS SALES FOR THE BALLET NUREYEV

Due to the high demand for the tickets for the ballet Nureyev, the Theatre introduces a special program for the preliminary sale, which contains the following conditions:

1. From 28 July (starting at 11 am) to 23 August 2018 at the Bolshoi Theatre Management Building Box Office tickets will be sold to customers, who purchase tickets for *Personal* visits to the performance.
2. In accordance with this program tickets are sold only on passport; every customer will be entitled to buy a maximum of 2 (two) tickets for the one title. The second ticket will be sold only on passport of the second spectator (at the time of purchase copies are allowed). From 28 July to 23 August, the second ticket can be purchased only for a place next to the first one.
3. During the pre-sale the Theatre will increase security presence at the Box Office to avoid repurchasing of tickets by the same person.
4. On 24 August starting from 11:00 tickets will be available on the official web-site of the Theatre. The tickets will be sold via CERTIFICATE indicating the personal data of spectator. The customer (holder of bank card) should exchange the CERTIFICATE for the original tickets prior to the performance in accordance with Bolshoi Theatre Management Building Box Office opening hours.
5. Tickets sold in accordance with this program are printed on special form with indication of the name and data of the spectator's document (passport, birth certificate of the minor child).
6. Tickets with corrections are invalid.
7. Changes of passport data and the name of the spectator in the purchased tickets are not made.
8. If the viewer is unable to attend the performance, he / she must personally submit an application with an indication of the reason to the Box Office of the Theatre in advance.

## A NOTE FROM PHILIP

I'd like to take a moment to welcome Yury and his wife, Tanya back to the US.

[Yury](#) is indeed back, and will be working even more closely with me and CITD—he has taken on a larger CITD project and returns as the new Associate Director of CITD. We started our professional collaboration in 2000 in Moscow. Our work together has taken us to St. Petersburg, Perm, Yekaterinburg, Chelyabinsk, Vladikavkaz, Omsk, Kostroma, and Nizhniy Novgorod. Also, to Hungary, Poland, Estonia, Bulgaria, Slovakia and Uganda. And San Francisco, Austin, New Orleans, Washington, New York, Philadelphia, Telluride, New Haven, Chicago, Boston, Ashfield, and Baltimore.



He's ready to take on this leadership role with me.

And, he's busy. He opens a new production, Lola Pierson's *PUTIN ON ICE*—a co-production of Single Carrot Theatre and Acme Corporation in Baltimore on 14 September. He then moves to the Wilma Theatre, directing Anne Washburn's *MR. BURNS*, a Post-Electric Play, opening 26 October in Philadelphia. Both productions run for a month.

And last week, he began his Visiting Assistant Professorship in Towson University's theatre program.

## THE CITD TEAM FOR 2018/19

I'd also like to introduce you to the folks now part of the CITD team for 2018-19. No one works full-time. All are working theatre artists. All have a deep commitment to the region and the work of CITD.



[Susan Stroupe](#) is taking on coordination of three projects soon to be launched. She has a long history with CITD, having held one of the earlier CITD fellowships. Originally from Atlanta, she came to Baltimore for the Towson University MFA Theatre program, and ended up staying in the city, working primarily as a director.

[bakerartist.org/portfolios/susan-stroupe](http://bakerartist.org/portfolios/susan-stroupe)

[Jarod Hanson](#) is the CITD 2018-20 Fellow and incoming Theatre MFA artist at Towson University. His background has been training and creating with my old friend Kari Margolis of the Margolis Method Center Int'l and MB ADAPTORS Company. He has toured and taught internationally. He is currently doing the movement work for Yury's *PUTIN ON ICE*. He helped create the Margolis Center in Barcelona two years ago.

[www.StJustus.com](http://www.StJustus.com)





[Lindsey Griffith](#) pitches in on multiple projects, and works with Carol, organizing the ever growing CITD archives. A writer and performer from Kansas City, she graduated from Towson's MFA program last June. She has had two tours of her latest piece, *HORSE PEOPLE* (East Coast and Mid-West) and will be showcasing at the HIGHFEST in Yerevan, Armenia in October. [www.lindsey.zone](http://www.lindsey.zone)

[Carol Baish](#), pictured here with our new pup, Lulu, started out with a MA in English Literature from the University of Maryland. She was the managing editor of the *American Scholar* until I talked her into joining me and running off to join the circus (The Theatre Project), where she was my professional partner for my time there (1971-91). We have been professional and life partners for 47 years.



I am very grateful to be working with this talented and generous group.

Stay strong, my friends,

**Philip Arnout**  
founder & director

A final word of thanks to our outgoing CITD Fellow, 2016-18, Julia Katz. Julia was critical in getting the CITD publications up and running. She will stay in the area, having just taken on two new positions. One, at George Mason University, and two, marriage to Will Rubens two days ago.

