Maria Shevtsova

'Small Forms' and Large: the Russian Case at the Golden Mask, 2019

Every year at the Golden Mask National Theatre Award and Festival in Moscow, the Russian Case has its special characteristics, and 2019 clearly reflected the selection made by the many critics who travel far and wide across Russia to choose shows for the Festival. In this overview Maria Shevtsova gives some idea of the work in the category generally described as 'small forms', which dominated the Russian Case, and breaks the category down into the different genres gathered under its name. She also refers to several productions that are 'large forms', notably those directed by Konstantin Bogomolov and Yury Butusov, who are major directors in the field acclaimed nationally and internationally. Shevtsova's *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Directing* (2014, co-authored) is a landmark in research on European directors and her *Rediscovering Stanislavsky* is forthcoming (2019). She is co-editor of *New Theatre Quarterly*.

Key terms: small forms, new drama, documentary theatre, avant-garde opera, theatre-dance.

THE RUSSIAN CASE, in its twentieth year in 2019, noticeably repeated the patterns of selection for the Golden Mask National Theatre Award and Festival, now in its twenty-fifth year. The curators of the Russian Case, which has been an integral part of the Golden Mask since its inception, were critics Anastasia Pauker, Roman Dolzhansky, and Andrey Kisilyov, who confirmed in their introductory meeting that its selection was pretty well representative of the major trends signalled by the Festival as a whole.

The shifting perspective of the Russian Case over the last two editions settled in 2019 on the theatre of small forms, as distinct from the large-scale ambitious productions of prominent theatre directors and companies that have traditionally been prominent in the Festival. This is no doubt due to the faltering economic situation in Russia, with its concomitant decline in government subsidies for the arts. Small forms cost significantly less to produce, as the theatre elsewhere in the world has had to acknowledge and act accordingly, and, as in Russia, opportunities were made within the constraints to explore, renovate, and expand the field.

The idea of 'small forms' has been well understood in Russian theatre since the early twentieth century as identifying a particular, chamber style, not always determined by the extent of funds available. Its manifestations in 2019 included contemporary avant-garde opera (a 'small form' by comparison with established 'grand' opera), contemporary dance (the Golden Mask programme also showed its usual interest in classical ballet), documentary and verbatim theatre, and new drama – habitual to the Golden Mask and, in particular to the Russian Case (see *NTQ* 85, 2006; *NTQ* 103, 2010; and *NTQ* 123, 2015). It encompassed as well immersive and promenade theatre (with small numbers of collaborators and participants), and performances in 'alternative' spaces – theatre foyers, youth clubs, or otherwise youth-dedicated spaces – that attracted new audiences.

The curators' only regret was that they were unable to include several productions of their choice, among them Kirill Serebrennikov's staging of Pushkin's *Little Tragedies*. Serebrennikov was one of the nominees among twenty-seven who contended for the prize of best director, with two directors nominated twice for different works. He is the head of the upbeat Gogol Centre in Moscow and was still under house arrest for alleged embezzlement of government funds

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at the time of his nomination. A Russian court released him and two of his colleagues on 8 April 2019 after a twenty-month detention, while a fourth detainee had been freed earlier, in May 2018 (the *Guardian* and the *Independent* online, 8 April 2019). The Gogol Centre's accountant was scheduled for trial separately.

As I write, news of the awards has come through and I can report that Serebrennikov received a Golden Mask for best director, to the delight of his many distinguished supporters in the theatre community. I have been led to understand that *Little Tragedies* was largely directed from his notes with the help of Skype (which makes us ask, once again, how many ways directing can be said to be 'directing').

While he was confined to his house, Serebrennikov managed to guide Verdi's *Nabucco*, contracted to the Hamburg Opera shortly before his arrest, via video reports of rehearsals and his replies on a USB stick, helped by his assistant director in situ in Hamburg. *Nabucco*, which focused on the plight of contemporary refugees, was premiered in March 2019. Although due consideration was given to the extremely difficult circumstances in which the opera was mounted, it was generally received negatively. Thus the *Financial Times*, reacting to the 'real refugees' who sing 'their own agonizingly reedy rendition of the famous number' ('Va penserio', aka the 'slaves' chorus'), wondered 'where the divide lies between championing the oppressed and exploiting the pitiable' (14 March 2019). The same critic, although generally sympathetic to eradicating social injustices, described the production as a 'sledgehammer'.

No such drama occurred during the Russian Case, although some of the works I saw related tangentially to the issue raised by the *FT* critic regarding the involvement of non-performance-trained or little-performance-experienced participants in events framed to be taken as professional. A salient example was *The Gospels, Part 1 and 4*, which was a version, shortened especially for the Russian Case, of a fully four-part contemporary opera based on the Gospel of St Luke, read and sung throughout its performance. The project is an intriguing one, and certainly challenging, but its execution was nothing short of woeful, not only because the sparsely noted music seemed derivative of the 'concrete' non-melodic music so familiar to us from the 1960s and the 1970s (Boulez, Stockhausen, Berio, Cathy Berberian) but also and primarily because it was decidedly crude and lacklustre. The singing, from a mixture of professional and amateur singers (according to the programme), was weak and movement was inconsequential, as well as clumsy and clunky. (What would it have taken to bring in a choreographer?) And, as observed by one of my international colleagues, why didn't they at least iron their costumes (white shirts and mostly white skirts, dressed with black heavy shoes)?

Alas, alas, what a disappointment it was, given its promises – as also, in another register, was *DJ Pavel*, 'directed', if that is really the right word, by Dmitry Volkastrelov, a young director who probes different idioms and who has appeared favourably in my various accounts of his work (*NTQ* 126, 2016; *NTQ* 131, 2017). Yet *DJ Pavel* would have been better billed as a party-with-spectators, except that this party was attended by young people rather too timid to join in the dancing, while the pre-appointed dancers, members of St Petersburg's Teatr Post (Volkostrelov's initiative in 2011), were too awkward and too boring to generate spectator enthusiasm.

Indeed, the most interesting thing about this 'experiment' was the music played by the DJ – 1980s Soviet 'pop' that had been the musical love of the playwright Mikhail Ugarov, co-founder of Tear.doc in 2002 with his playwright wife Yelena Gremina (*NTQ* 123, 2015). Gremina was Russia's pioneer of documentary theatre, having been inspired by the verbatim techniques that she had learned from London's Royal Court.

Ugarov died suddenly of a heart attack just as the Russian Case ended in April 2018. He had directed Dmitry Danilov's award-winning play for that year, *A Man from the Town of Podolsk*, which was performed up and down the country to unanimous acclaim and was shown again in the Russian Case

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Sea. Pines at the Meyerhold Centre, Moscow, directed by Sasha Denisov. Photo: Margarita Denisova.

2019 in homage to Ugarov. Gremina died of heart failure about six weeks after her husband.

This tragic sequence was marked by Sasha Dugdale, a translator of Russian new drama and the British Council representative in Moscow during the inception of Teatr.doc (*The Guardian,* 24 May 2018). Volkostrelov's tribute to Ugarov would not have been possible without his partner Pavel Pryazhko's musical research. Pryazhko, in the role of the DJ in question, was the announced 'playwright' of the event, who uttered one or two inaudible lines, which were probably his entire text (as had been the case with his *The Soldier*, directed by Volkostrelov in 2012).

Another tribute, this time from the team of Teatr.doc, took place at the Meyerhold Centre. Ugarov and Gremina had trained most of the actors on the job. They performed *Sea. Pines* (not in the Festival's programme), directed by Sasha Denisov, who is principally known as a playwright. A screenplay, staged for the first time, *Sea. Pines* is about adventurous young people of the 1960s on holiday in seedy conditions seen from the perspectives of the protagonists, now reasonably established adults. It is evocative, witty – a snatched photograph of a bygone era in which the potential of two characters as well as their possible future together is stymied by the interference of the KGB – caught fleetingly and only slightly accentuated at the end.

Eight actors play as many characters, skilfully changing scenes, but the production and performance have the standard shortcomings of documentary theatre, starting with a tendency to be over-literal and in an unvarying tone. Moreover, the playing space was tiny, and it stifled the spirit of freedom that can be sensed in and between Ugarov's words.

Less photographic and much more theatrical was an energetic *Dead Souls* directed by Oleg Lipovestsy with Poisk Theatre from Lesosibirsk. Three male actors play numerous central characters out of Gogol's novel focused on the preposterous scam of buying and selling dead peasants. Gogol's sharp, frequently terrifying humour is right there in synthesis. Roles change rapidly and small details of costume (a wig, a dress, a hat),

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gesture and movement (arms and hands suggesting a troika running through the night), and props (rearranged benches and boxes implying different houses and rooms where trade occurs) keep the fast pace going. Here and there, the actors take turns to read from Gogol's book. It is an engaging, honest show, but, finally, too reliant on a battery of theatricalized images, oral and aural, of theatre lore to be seen as freshly discovered.

The contrast with another Siberian company, Theatre Globus from Novosibirsk playing at the Theatre of Nations, could hardly have been more striking. *Pianists*, based on the novel by Norwegian pianist and writer Ketil Bjørnstad, was a 'small form', with a significant cast of fifteen, including several musicians. Visually and sonically stunning in its simplicity, clarity, and elegance, it was awarded the Golden Mask for the best small-form production of the Festival.

Director Boris Pavlovich's task was to give the work a musical structure, which he does, although not by following the phrasing and rhythms of Debussy and Ravel, the composers whom the teenagers Axel and Anna respectively favour for the piano competition they are to enter. Instead, he spatialized verbal sound, and so also dialogue, in order to create openness and what could be called spatial breathing. Composer Roman Stolyar provides a score that occasionally suggests but never reproduces Debussy or Ravel and which, if anything, references Stockhausen. His sonic spatialization heightens speech, and at the same time has the effect of foregrounding the production's visual spatialization.

In this respect, the space is constructed by three cleanly outlined tiers of space in light wood suggesting a podium, which is flanked by walls whose long lines are broken up by windows – for the most part black, blank squares. Only later in the action do blinds pulled down from behind turn them into white squares, by which time it is clear that the eye has been drawn to some kind of painterly composition: it would have to be Mondrian if Stockhausen is indeed the musical reference. But then it might be enough simply to say that the production is rather spartan, providing an unperturbed, cool environment for the actors' similarly cool performances of material that reflects on the powers of music and how music absorbs the emotions of its players – so much so that its players live their lives as if they were nothing else but music.

Yet these lives are full of tragedy: the death by drowning of Axel's mother, when he was younger (suicide or accident?), which cauterized his emotions and ultimately prevented him from winning the first prize; Anna's sudden illness, which carries her away shortly after she wins the coveted prize, making her brilliant debut her last concert, as her music teacher (played as a beautiful sex tiger and disciplinarian in one) tells Axel to show up his inadequacies, as she shows up those of her husband by her very existence; and the teenagers' sexual awakening, which never stood a chance. All that is tragic is restrained, indicating the drive – especially noticeable in the past three or four years among the newer, younger directors and their actors – to diminish, if not to reject outright, the 'old' Russian, introspectively produced, deeply emotionally felt acting, and its impact on spectators.

Such is the cool, dispassionate style Konstantin Bogomolov pursues in his *The Three Sisters* at the Chekhov Moscow Art Theatre, which has been his main platform throughout the 2010s. He has developed this style conterminously (occasionally in the one production) with his savage satire, devastating cynicism, unbridled and uncompromising artistic daring, and an energizing sense of the ridiculous and the absurd in contemporary social and political life.

An Ideal Husband (2013) might be said to crown his flamboyant critical productions, while *The Dragon* by Evgeny Shvarts, and *Husbands and Wives*, after Woody Allen's film, both premiered in 2017, allowed his capacity for laid-back, even deadpan presentation free rein, surpassed only by *The Three Sisters* premiered in 2018.

Bogomolov's Chekhov is elegantly arranged (design by Larisa Lomakina). The diagonal line of its composition is marked by the regular entries and exits of the actors

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Above: *Dead Souls* at the Poisk Theatre, Lesosibirsk, directed by Oleg Lipovetsky. Photo: Yulia Gridina.
Below: *Pianists* at the Globus Theatre, Novosibirsk, directed by Boris Pavlovich. Photo: Viktor Dmitriev.



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from a precise point in the great depths of the Art Theatre stage, and this movement on the diagonal softens the bold glare of the geometrically severe neon-light tubes that silhouette a large room/house and its angled roof. White neon light alternates with changing ostentatious colours (yellow, candy pink, royal blue). The outlined roof becomes one of three 'screens' for close-up images of the actor-characters or for an expansive view of sections of the room.

All three are generally used simultaneously. Projections of this kind are typical of Bogomolov's large-scale productions, and the 'sceens' add, on an upper level, to the geometric planes below that he likes to use to single out particular situations and actions, while providing opportunities for the actors to move from plane to plane organically.

The retro furniture – expensive 1950s updated for the late 2010s – is where the actors mostly sit, speaking Chekhov's lines like ordinary contemporary people but articulating them so distinctly that they resound in this open space. Chekhov's text is, in fact, Bogomolov's and his actors' central focus. His close attention – the company spent six months intensively analyzing the play – results in an unusually crisp kind of psychological theatre, performed by remarkably supple actors concerned with the nuanced meaning of what they are saying rather than with how or why they are saying it.

The key word here is 'saying' rather than 'acting', and from this concentration on the word emerges an unexpected discovery – a centred, deeply aware and intelligent Tuzenbach to whom Darya Morozov (winner of the best female role) lends the enormous strength she had found within herself for this role. Another discovery was Kulygin, never seen before as a controlling husband (Kyrill Vlasov) – more reason for a Masha not to want to go home.

Bogomolov deletes Anfisa, Rode, and Fedotik, whom he must have seen as distractions from Chekhov's interest in the psychological make-up of people. A director prone to satirical gags, Bogomolov here allows himself only one: Anfisa is 'represented' by a mannequin slumped over a stool throughout the first part of the performance, carelessly lugged off when it closes.

The Karamazovs (2013) was part of the Russian Case in 2014. Bogomolov's title, minus Dostoevsky's 'Brothers', implies that a prototypical family is at issue, like 'the Smiths' or 'the Joneses'; and he adapted Dostoevsky's novel so that, for instance, the devout Alyosha Karamazov takes his own life in this production and his brother Dmitry's sexual escapades end with his two women lovers



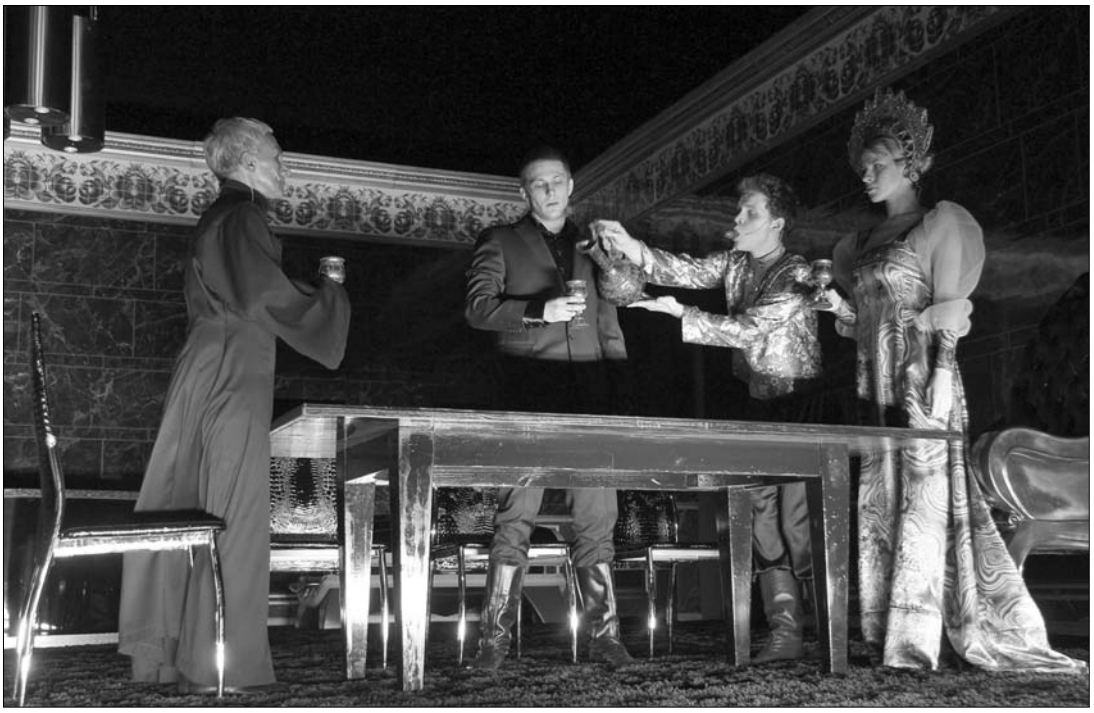
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Two productions from the Moscow Art Theatre, directed by Konstantin Bogomolov.
This page:*The Three Sisters*. Opposite page: *The Karamazovs*.
Photos: Ekaterina Tsvetkova.



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The Karamazovs at the Moscow Art Theatre, directed by Konstantin Bogomolov. Photo: Ekaterina Tsvetkova.

in bed together. Screens and planes, as in *An Ideal Husband* and *The Three Sisters,* now involve 'new rich' black leather armchairs, black glossy tiling, and a huge, shining bar and kitchen at the back of the playing space.

Seeing the production again five years later was a revelation, showing just how operative the principle of a production's growth in repertoire still is in the house where Stanislavsky first put it into practice. Gone were the rough edges of Bogomolov's trademark ridicule, cynicism, and raw exposure of personal human failings and social and political carnage. Where previously the Art Theatre actors had adhered to Bogomolov's cerebral approach, lowering Dostoevsky's temperature considerably, they had now made the production their own, fully enjoying their reservoir of visceral, intensely concentrated, finely tuned, and totally compelling acting.

The entire cast, which included Darya Morozov in a different dimension, was exceptional in every way, handling equally brilliantly the first part of the production, two and a half hours long and played very much from within, and the increasingly extroverted, increasingly absurd, second part, which is longer. Nevertheless, the second part kept Dostoevsky's themes regarding good and evil and the existence of God in view, while layering them with outrageous, ribald, or deliberately offensive displays of abandoned sex, rapacious capital, and corrupt politics, all keyed to our time. Energy did not drop for a second, and one can only marvel that the great Russian school of acting is still alive, nowhere more volcanically, incandescently, and with ceaseless versatility than in Igor Mirkurbanov's performances of both Fyodor Karamazov and the Devil.

Bogomolov being Bogomolov, it is not surprising that he pulled the carpet out from under everybody's feet and produced a one-hour-and-ten-minute piece for two: himself and a young woman. The performance begins with Bogomolov sitting in a corner, while the young woman leans forward on the floor, coughing non-stop for a good twenty minutes. Disconcerted, some specta-

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tors coughed back, others tittered, and still others walked out. This could have been nothing but a director's provocation, daring the audience to sit it out. Lomakina designed the chamber space in the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre as a dilapidated iron container with nothing else in it but a microphone through which the two protagonists recite poetry and otherwise address the audience.

The piece, after Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, is probably best described as imagistic, in that concise images and allusions carry its meaning. Its subject not only concerns the ravages of tuberculosis (Mann's novel in a nutshell for Bogomolov's purposes) but also those of starvation – emblematic for the director in the cannibalism that had occurred during the siege of Leningrad in the Second World War. Bogomolov briefly adopts the role of a narrator who tells his story of how he ate a young girl who sat by a window on an upper floor of the building that he passed every day. Strains of Chaliapin singing momentarily give the production a poignancy that it studiously avoids.

Then there was the large-scale theatre-dance *Shakespeare*, which mixed and merged bits of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and a sonnet or two, gradually indicating that the link between the fragments was the theme of love. It was calculated to be 'edgy', 'hard' – Hamlet's love for his mother is inescapable – and eye-catching.

Directed by Yevgeny Kulagin at the Gogol Centre, it offered a number of arresting sequences, like Gertrude's giving birth to some nine fully-grown Hamlets. She stands in dance mode while the first Hamlet pushes his way through her upper thighs, followed by several more, who dance as they go. The group, having moved to a big slope behind their previous position on the flat floor, produces more Hamlets in quick succession.

Why '*theatre*-dance' and not '*dance* theatre', as Bausch called it? Because these are actors who dance competently but are nowhere near the technical level of Bausch's. In any case, they were not trained to be dancers as such. Constraints imposed by physical training might well prove to be an obstacle in the



Shakespeare at the Gogol Centre, Moscow, directed by Yevgeny Kulagin and Ivan Yestegneev.
Photo: Ira Polyarnaya.

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longer term for what, outside Russia, is called more and more 'interdisciplinary performance'.

A good number of small forms were on offer for Russian Case participants that I was unable to see, including another daredevil résumé of a novel – of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* in ninety minutes for four performers by director-choreographer Maxim Didenko. Among others missed were varied experiments from a number of groups from St Petersburg of which one, Tru Theatre, performed something like an interlude in the Electrotheatre café. Then there was the Drama Theatre from Pskov whose director Sergey Chekhov and five actors performed *The Potudan River*, based on Andrey Platonov's early Soviet novella, which, unlike Platonov, was here set in an old people's home. Projections on screens having become popular, as in Western Europe, they were well and truly there to be seen.

Most impressive, according to my colleagues, was *Utopia* for four actors by the major new playwright Mikhaïl Durnenkov at the Theatre of Nations. The play concerns a man who wants a dysfunctional family to reconstruct the café they ran during his youth. The venture fails, destroying the newfound hope that their patron had inspired in mother, father, and son and then had taken away. Directed by Marat Gatsalov, who has several productions to his name at this theatre, this was said to be moving and visually beautiful.

Fortune smiled on me and I was able to see work by two directors whom I have been following over the years: Donizetti's opera *Don Pasquale* (2016, not in the Festival), directed by Timofey Kulyabin, and *Hamlet* (2017, part of the Festival), directed by Yury Butusov. Kulyabin is director of the Red Torch company in Novosibirsk, and until recently Butusov was the artistic director of the Lensoviet Theatre in St Petersburg, joining the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow as a director in 2018.

Kulyabin developed Donizetti's *opera buffa* at the Bolshoy Theatre with aplomb. The complicated plot, full of intrigue and counter-intrigue, revolves around the eponymous old hero who has set his sights on marrying a young lady. Unbeknown to him, his nephew Ernesto wishes to marry her too. The plot eventually unravels, leaving the nephew free to marry the girl, while the uncle, having been fooled and bossed around, is only too relieved to be rid of her, which was the plan all along.

Kulyabin cleverly fools the audience by presenting her first of all as a dippy airhead in her gown before a mirror with a bed full of toys and a bucket beside it with a bottle of champagne. Slowly but surely his parodic approach shifts as he reveals her to be strong-willed, a woman who is nobody's fool and who, given half a chance, would be a modern feminist. Ernesto, whom the director takes literally by his name, is featured more and more as a burlesque earnest, providing a marvellously hapless foil to his decisive Norina – finally showing her true colours without any effort for laughs on anybody's part, let alone the director's.

Kulyabin's gift for comedy (not often explored in his drama productions) takes off in countless ways, going from his pastiche of academic *mores* (Don Pasquale is cast as a renowned professor), legal chicanery, and theatrical tricks to strait-laced jokes done in typically vaudeville style. These latter include a rope of something that suddenly falls down from the flies and just as suddenly blows up into gaudy flowers which, in a trice, frame the entire stage. Meanwhile, the protagonists are blind to events like this going on around them. The comedy keeps pointing to the world today – to its pretensions, deceits, and conspicuous tastes – while the singing is superb, and fully in harmony with the direction. The production is fresh and young, made with a light touch and uncommon accomplishment by a director only thirty-four years old.

Butusov, in his own words a late-starter as a director, now has numerous extraordinary award-winning productions behind him, and *Hamlet,* although not one of the latter, has the hallmarks of his original, richly inventive imagination. The first part of his three-part *Hamlet* is an enigmatic textual mosaic in which Shakespeare's actions and

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Utopia at the Theatre of Nations, Moscow, directed by Marat Gatsalov. Photo: Maria Zaivyi.

dialogue are jumbled, out of sequence with the play's events and points of view. It is too dense to decipher in one sitting, and several actors playing the same part make the complex textures more impenetrable.

There appear to be two Ophelias, for example, and my guess is that this is a remnant of Butusov's rehearsal methods (where, for instance, several actors play the same part). Butusov often retains certain features of the *études* processes of his rehearsals in the 'final' production. Hamlet, played by Laura Pitskhelauri (nominated for the best woman's role), stalks the stage – and often a long table diagonally crossing the stage – as if s/he and not and her/his father had emerged from the shades. And while this Hamlet is lithe and physically strong, there seems to be something tentative, something fragile, in her/his character. This Hamlet might well be you and me and everyone, and this may well explain why Butusov has combined all genders in one figure, and in such an iconic figure as this in world culture.

By the time the first part of the production ends, it is more or less clear that the Ghost has made his appearance and Horatio had seen him. Thereafter, the Ghost is integral to the action, and his continual presence in it increasingly shows just how much impact her/his father had had on Hamlet by imposing on her/him a cruel and ultimately impossible task. Hamlet Senior takes his place in the play as never before, as it goes enigmatically towards its end, to a Hamlet who runs and runs in a huge circle, saying more and more firmly to Horatio that she/he will continue (to seek revenge?) and will continue to be (rather than not be).

Rumour has it that this may well have been the last performance of this Lensoviet *Hamlet*, whose actors Butusov had taught and nurtured. If this is so, then access to its secret will be closed; or perhaps Butusov, who, in the Festival programme, says that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a secret, does not know how to disclose it, nor does he wish to. Or it may not be possible in a world like ours, so topsy-turvy, jumbled, and uncertain, like the text the actors play. Butusov's text may be his metaphor for this world. But, for sure, there will be many more *Hamlet*s at the Golden Mask, as there will be elsewhere in many languages from multiple angles.

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