INTRODUCTION

Drama Against “Theater” and Theater After Drama

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What gives a play, a theater performance, a work of contemporary art that elusive sense of authenticity, the feeling that it can put you in direct, unmediated contact with the real? Recalling the initial inspiration behind the Moscow Art Theater (MAT, founded in 1898), the great Russian director Konstantin Stanislavski observed:

Our plan for the new enterprise was radical. We rebelled against the old style of acting, “theatricality,” spurious emotion, declamation, overacting, against stupid conventions in the staging and the sets, against stardom, which marred ensemble work, against the whole way performances were put together and the triviality of the repertoire of the time.

In our efforts to demolish and rebuild the art of the theatre, we declared war on all conventions, wherever they occurred, in acting, directing, sets, costumes, interpretation, etc.¹

What the young Stanislavski rejected was not “theatricality” per se—he was no stranger to theatrical artifice and even excess—but

those conventions and practices that impeded the portrayal of what he called “the realism of life.”² For the MAT’s inaugural production of Aleksey Tolstoy’s *Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich*, Stanislavski led an expedition to the Russian provinces in search of inspiration and remnants of ancient material culture, hired expert costume makers, and commissioned expensive and historically accurate set designs (breaking with the established practice of recycling sets from earlier productions). He also began to strictly enforce the imaginary boundary separating the audience from the stage and, over time, developed a system of techniques and strategies meant to help actors give more psychologically convincing performances. The immediate aim of these innovations was to make audiences forget they were at the theater, to make them respond to the action on stage *as if* it were real. More importantly, it was to make theater responsive to the changing realities of life at the turn of the twentieth century, preventing audiences in an age of great social and scientific transformation from repeating Stanislavski’s own favorite phrase: “I don’t believe it!” (*Ne veriu!*).

A hundred years after the founding of the MAT, at the turn of another century, Russian theater makers once again “declared war on all conventions.” Many of their pronouncements sounded strikingly familiar: “what they call ‘theater’ today is an entertaining spectacle,” “theater is dead, and the one we have . . . is a lie, a great illusion,” “what is important is lack of affectation and clarity of expression,” “a theater where no one acts.”³ We have, in effect, another attack on “theatricality,” one of many that has punctuated the history of Western theater. But certain affinities with Stanislavski and nineteenth-century playwrights such as Chekhov and Strindberg notwithstanding, the playwrights, directors, and actors who came together to form the New Russian Drama movement were operating within a very different cultural and political context and, as a consequence, with a different concept of the real.

Spawned in the minds of largely provincial playwrights who first *read* (rather than staged) their plays at sparsely attended festivals and in cramped, bare-walled basements, the early works of New Drama startled and angered audiences with their hypernaturalistic portrayals of sex and violence, their scathing critique of contemporary Russian mores, and their at times inadvertent flaunting of the norms of “good writing.” Traditionalists dismissed these works as *sramaturgy* (from *sram*, “shame”) and *chernukha* (from *chernyi*, “black,” which is associated in Russian with filth and misery).⁴ But like any movement daring enough to offer a fresh vision of reality, New Drama slowly began to attract a growing number of enthusiasts and to expand its reach. In the two decades of its contentious existence, New Drama has helped a new generation of Russian audiences once again believe in the theater. With the movement currently facing another critical juncture, we offer a new English-language anthology of its representative works.

The rise of New Drama cannot be understood without a glance back at the recent history of Russian theater—a history that closely followed (and at times anticipated) developments in Russian culture and politics.

Theater and politics have long been deeply intertwined in Russia. The theatricalization of life was one of the rallying cries of the Russian avant-garde, which embraced the 1917 revolution in part because it promised to transform everyday life into living theater. The performative turn enacted by artists in this period radically expanded the very notion of theater: no longer confined to the scenic realization of dramatic texts, revolutionary performances drew on popular forms such as the variety show and the circus, often spreading beyond the physical confines of traditional theaters to

occupy public squares, factories, and even trains. Soviet citizens in the late 1910s and 1920s were treated to a kaleidoscope of theatrical styles and genres—from Vsevolod Meyerhold’s experiments in biomechanics and the absurdist theater of the OBERIU group to traveling agitprop performances and participatory mass spectacles. This period of intense experimentation lasted until Stalin’s consolidation of power in the late 1920s. In 1932 the Central Committee of the Communist Party disbanded all existing literary and artistic groups and organizations, replacing them with centralized professional artist unions; and at the First Soviet Writers’ Congress in 1934 Socialist Realism was declared to be the official method for artistic production. Defined by Andrei Zhdanov as a combination of realism and revolutionary romanticism—“the most stern and sober practical work with a supreme spirit of heroic deeds and magnificent future prospects”⁵—Socialist Realism proved to be utterly divorced from any authentic experience of Soviet reality. Showing the triumphs of positive heroes over forces hostile to the communist project, theater now had to glorify Soviet achievements in ways that were comprehensible to the uncultivated masses. Avant-garde experimentation was attacked on the grounds of “formalism.” At the same time, a superficial form of Stanislavski’s “system” was officially canonized as part of Stalin’s campaign against nonrepresentational art—in effect, entrenching psychological realism in Russian theater for decades to come.

Restrictions on cultural production were relaxed, however, after Stalin’s death in 1953, bringing a new generation of artists and audiences to the theater. Soviet society in the period of late socialism was fervently theatrical. Although censorship was never eliminated and many Western authors remained taboo, theater makers began to test the boundaries of artistic speech through the camouflaging techniques of Aesopian language. Ordinary citizens went to great lengths for the chance to attend Yuri Lyubimov’s Taganka and Oleg

Efremov's *Sovremennik* (Contemporary) theaters in Moscow, contributing to the virtual sacralization of theater in Soviet culture. The playbills of select theaters now included daring adaptations of the classics, such as Lyubimov's legendary staging of *Hamlet* starring the singer-songwriter Vladimir Vysotsky, and, increasingly into the 1980s, works by contemporary playwrights that went against the dictates of Socialist Realism. Alexander Vampilov, Mikhail Roshchin, and Ludmila Petrushevskaya painted a darker, more sinister picture of reality than had been previously possible in Soviet theater. Their works paved the way for the brutal realism of New Drama. The 1980s also saw the proliferation of small theater studios and amateur theater circles in both the capitals and the provinces. In a country with few independent civic institutions and officially without religion, theater became a substitute for the church, the parliament, and the free press.

All of that changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which plunged Russian theater into what some have described as a decade of stagnation.⁶ Historians cite various reasons for theater's decline in this period: the rate of emigration among educated Russians was high; the economy was in free fall; new social and civic institutions, however imperfect, had begun to emerge; and theater now had greater competition from other media, such as commercial film and television. The institutional organization of Russian theater also underwent radical change: whereas the state held a total monopoly on theater in the Soviet Union, censoring its contents but also guaranteeing its livelihood, the post-Soviet period gave rise to a more complicated network of state-, municipally, and privately funded theaters, many of which struggled to survive in Russia's new economic reality. The American theater critic John Freedman, who has done perhaps more than anyone to promote contemporary Russian playwriting in the United States, observes that the collapse of the former administrative system left gaping

holes in theaters' budgets: "Subsidies for production, salaries, and infrastructure were slashed or wiped out, and nothing was instituted to remedy the situation. Inflation hit so hard that even theaters with money at the beginning of the month were not sure it would be worth anything the next." He also recalls that the unprecedented rate of social and political change had a "stunning" effect on the Russian public, that "historical disclosures made daily, even hourly, on live television in the early 1990s were so grippingly dramatic that theater attendance plummeted."⁷ Those who did attend theater wanted to escape, rather than relive, the hardships of post-Soviet life. As a result, Russian theater completely lost touch with contemporary reality.

This is not to say that Russia lacked groundbreaking experimental theater in those years. In fact, as Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky point out in a seminal study of New Drama, Russian theater in the early 1990s was changing, absorbing the artistic energy of the theater studios that emerged in the previous decade, many of which were transformed into larger theaters with charismatic directors at their helm.⁸ In their search for new playwriting, however, these auteur directors rarely strayed further than well-known Perestroika authors such as Petrushevskaya and Nina Sadur. The repertoires of their theaters consisted largely of new interpretations of Russian and foreign classics, as well as plays by authors who had been forbidden in the Soviet Union: Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionescu, Russian avant-gardists such as Velimir Khlebnikov and Daniil Kharms. Reflecting a growing international trend to reach beyond the dramatic text (more on this later), many directors also turned to adapting short stories and novels. Kama Ginkas, for example, created a whole series out of the works of Dostoevsky, and Pyotr Fomenko adapted Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades* and Gogol's *Dead Souls*. These directors had little interest in the work of young playwrights, who were shut out of their experimental theaters no

less than from the booming entertainment industry. With few possibilities to see their works on stage, the playwrights who came of age in this period came to be known as Russian theater's "lost generation."

The movement that eventually came to be known as New Drama has its roots in the private initiatives of veteran playwrights such as Viktor Slavkin, Mikhail Roshchin, Alexei Kazantsev, and Nikolai Kolyada, who sought to nurture young talent by founding new journals of dramaturgy, festivals, playwriting schools, and theaters (see the chronology for details). The annual festival of young playwriting Lyubimovka—initially held at Stanislavski's family estate on the outskirts of Moscow—became an especially important forum for the alternative theater crowd, providing an opportunity for young playwrights to share their work and come into contact with potential collaborators. A reading of Olga Mukhina's *Tanya-Tanya* at this festival in 1995 led to its staging at the Fomenko Workshop Theater the following year, and after creating a sensation with his rowdy staging of Vassily Sigarev's *Plasticine* at the 2000 festival, the now world famous theater director Kirill Serebrennikov was invited to stage two other influential works of New Drama at the MAT: the Presnyakov Brothers' *Terrorism* (2002) and *Playing the Victim* (2004).

Among the best-known works of New Drama thanks to a film Serebrennikov made of it in 2006, *Playing the Victim* exhibits many features that characterized the early phase of the movement: e.g., aimless and socially alienated heroes, the use of obscene language (traditionally taboo and, as of 2014, again subjected to censorship in Russia), matter-of-fact portrayal of sex and violence. Estranged from his parents and unable to form meaningful relationships with anyone around him, the play's hero Valya makes a living reenacting the final movements of murder victims for a homicide investigation team, pretending, at different moments in the play, to be stabbed,

drowned, poisoned, and shot. His strange job offers him “inoculation” against death, we are told, but it may also be a way of muffling the sense of meaninglessness that pervades his life. Valya’s behavior brings to mind the nihilistic heroes of British “in-her-face” playwrights Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane, both of whom came of age under the neoliberal leadership of Margaret Thatcher. But the play is also deeply rooted in the Russian experience of the post-Soviet period, when the loss of an earlier value system, combined with poorly executed market reforms, resulted in the erosion of the social fabric. Valya’s case becomes symptomatic of a society caught in a vicious cycle of (self-)victimization and violence. The legitimizing myth of the Putin regime has been that it put an end to the rampant violence of the “wild 1990s” (a term popularized by Putin’s United Russia party in the run-up to the 2007 parliamentary elections). Written in 2002, three years after Putin first came to power, *Playing the Victim* suggests that violence had simply become routine.

While the success of Mukhina and the Presnyakovs showed that contemporary playwrights were finally breaking into the mainstream, the majority of their colleagues continued to be shunned by the establishment. At the turn of the century, several new theaters appeared to help remedy this problem: The Playwriting and Directing Center (f. 1998), Teatr.doc (f. 2002) and Praktika (f. 2005) in Moscow, and Kolyada-Theater (f. 2001) in Ekaterinburg.

One of Russia’s few truly independent theaters, and the host of Lyubimovka from 2004, Teatr.doc has in many ways become the spiritual home of New Drama. The “.doc” in the title stands for “documentary,” signaling the most important new tendency popularized by this theater. In fact, documentary theater is native to Russia: it was one of several forms of “literature of fact” (*literatura fakta*) that sprung up in the immediate aftermath of the 1917 revolution. However, along with other avant-garde trends, it largely disappeared from the Soviet Union in the 1930s only to be rediscovered again

at the turn of the twenty-first century thanks to a series of seminars and workshops conducted in Moscow by delegates from London's Royal Court Theatre. Trained in the "verbatim" technique—a method for constructing plays on the basis of interview transcripts and other primary documents—Teatr.doc's artists introduced audiences at their small basement theater to heroes never before seen on the Russian stage: migrant workers from Central Asia, prison inmates, prostitutes, sexual minorities, etc. From the start, Teatr.doc also used theater to respond critically to social and political crises. It was only at Teatr.doc, for example, that one could see plays about the 2004 terrorist school siege in Beslan or about the prison murder of whistleblower Sergei Magnitsky. There have also been shows about the 2011–2012 protest movement in Russia, Russian political prisoners, and the war in Ukraine.

Written by Teatr.doc's founders, the husband and wife team of Mikhail Ugarov and Elena Gremina, *September.doc* helps us understand why documentary theater has become such an important, if controversial, trend. The play centers on the September 1, 2004, terrorist school siege in the North Ossetian town of Beslan, which, after what many consider to have been a botched rescue operation on the part of Russian security forces, resulted in the deaths of 334 hostages (186 of whom were children). Given the extremely sensitive nature of this event—often called the Russian 9/11—the authors had to think carefully about how to approach it, in the end choosing to focus less on the event itself than on the public reaction to it from different groups within Russia. Although Teatr.doc's usual method entails conducting interviews with real human subjects, this time the authors decided to construct their play entirely out of messages culled from Russian, North Ossetian, and Chechen internet blogs and forums. The resulting play exposed aggression to be the one trait shared by *all* segments of Russian society, as largely anonymous internet users trade insults, peddle in conspiracy theories, and even

call for genocide. These voices are presented verbatim and in keeping with Teatr.doc's principle of the "zero position" (*nol' pozitsiia*), which requires that the author refrain from taking sides. The task of judging is left to the individual audience member who is confronted with a difficult moral choice. The reception of *September.doc* testifies to the provocative nature of this approach: Ugarov and Gremina were accused of anti-Muslim bias when they presented their play at a theater festival in France, while many who saw the play in Moscow thought it was pro-Islamist and anti-Russian.

The rise of documentary theater in Russia not only helped remind artists and audiences of theater's social mission but also had a profound effect on the language of Russian theater. Exposing stories of trauma and giving voice to those living on the margins of society entails striving to render these stories and voices as accurately and ethically as possible, without manipulation, judgment, or heavy-handed editorial intervention on the part of the artistic team. For this reason, stagings of documentary plays in Russia have usually privileged oral speech over physical acting—a practice reinforced by the central role that *chitki* ("readings") have played in the development of New Drama.⁹ Moreover, scarcity of funding has led small theaters like Teatr.doc to embrace a minimalist, "poor theater" aesthetic. While the resulting shows can often seem unprofessional—and stand in stark contrast to the many well-funded productions of documentary plays in some European countries—the lack of expensive stage and costume design, supporters argue, has the positive effect of ensuring that the audience's full attention is given over to the performer's words. Actors deliver their lines in a manner that preserves all the quirks and flaws of the original testimony, with even the hemming and hawing intact. As a result, the language of Russian theater has been enriched through the assimilation of different sociolects and speech registers, enraging traditionalists but

more accurately documenting the linguistic range of contemporary Russian society.

The rise of documentary theater has also sparked a wave of formal experimentation by nondocumentary playwrights, who were forced to reevaluate not only their roles as producers of texts for the theater but also the changing relationship between theater and the real. The works of both Ivan Vyrypaev and the Belarus Pavel Pryazhko may be called “postdocumentary” for the way they assimilate or ironically respond to contemporary documentary trends.¹⁰ Pryazhko, who writes in Russian,¹¹ has developed a pseudo-documentary approach to storytelling, placing his audiences in the position of a camera lens that records whatever is happening in front of it. Here’s a typical passage from his play *The Locked Door*:

An apartment. Valery is visiting a friend. Not thinking about anything, Valery waits for his friend to make coffee. Valery’s friend walks in with a tray holding two cups of coffee, sets down the tray, and offers a cup to Valery. Valery takes the cup. Drinks. The friend sits down on the couch holding a cup of coffee and also drinks. This does not produce any tension. Each one is preoccupied with his coffee and is not thinking about anything. A cell phone beeps. Valery’s friend gets up from the couch, walks over to the phone, reads the new text message. Valery finishes his coffee and gets up from the couch.

VALERY’S FRIEND (*without taking his eyes off the phone*):

Taking off?

Valery doesn’t respond, he waits for his friend to see him out. Without taking his eyes off the phone, the friend is first to make toward the exit in order to see Valery out. Valery follows him.

Pryazhko himself prefers to call his works “texts” rather than “plays,” and indeed *The Locked Door* follows none of the conventional rules of dramatic writing. There are no fateful conflicts, peripeteia, or climaxes; the “action” is limited to mundane events such as watching television and boiling the kettle. None of the characters are psychologically fleshed out; despite the overabundance of stage directions—the artistic function of which Pryazhko radically reinvents—the characters’ interiority is “locked” to outside viewers and maybe even to themselves. One of Pryazhko’s most frequent stage directions is “he [or she] is not thinking about anything,” and indeed the meager cerebral activity of his heroes is shocking in the context of Russian drama after Stanislavski and Chekhov. The texts are constructed according to paratactic, rather than syntactic, principles of composition, forcing us to give equal weight to all aspects of the text. As theater critic Pavel Rudnev observes: “Into the ‘lens’ of the playwright [Pryazhko] falls what would have previously been considered dramaturgical refuse: small motions, small movements, fragments of phrases, interjections, etc. Not only does all of this comprise a curious documentary method of observing reality, but also an ordeal for the school of Russian psychological theater, which is prepared to ‘run’ the life of a character through the mill of events, but not of uneventfulness.”¹²

If Pryazhko’s heroes speak little and not very well, the heroes of Ivan Vyrypaev suffer from veritable logorrhea. One of New Drama’s most internationally acclaimed playwrights, Vyrypaev rose to fame with his “modern gospel” play *Oxygen*, which premiered at Teatr.doc in 2002. Since then, he has written more than a dozen plays, all of which deal, in one way or another, with problems of an essentially spiritual nature (Vyrypaev’s outlook has been informed by Russian Orthodoxy and Buddhism). Vyrypaev’s 2012 play *Summer Wasps Sting in November, Too* centers on a seemingly trivial argument among three friends over whose house their friend Marcus visited

the previous Monday. Each character's account is contradicted not only by those of their friends but also by later accounts given by the same character. But what at first feels like an Abbott and Costello comedy routine quickly turns into a drama of existential suffering as the heroes grow increasingly exasperated by their inability to arrive at the truth. Speaking in repetitive sentences whose rhythm is reminiscent of scripture, the heroes can't help but call to mind the biblical Job: "Oh, why is this world such a monster? A monster that devours its own children? Why is this hideous world so blood-thirsty, why does it bite off the heads of its own children? What have we done to deserve this, how have we sinned? What is it all for? What is it all for? What for?" The only reply comes in the form of the nonsensical phrase that gives the play its title, leaving the characters (and Vyrypaev's audiences) in a state of aporia. Moreover, in *Summer Wasps*, Vyrypaev continues his baroque reflection on the illusory nature of modern life, begun in plays like *July* and *Illusions*. Modifying an alienation device first employed in *July*—in which the gruesome monologue of a sixty-three-year-old cannibal named Pyotr was to be performed by a female actor—Vyrypaev has the heroes refer to each other by the names Donald, Sarah, and Robert, even though the names given in the stage directions are, inexplicably, Joseph, Elena, and Mark. The play's emotional rhetoric is thus ironically undercut as audience members are led to question the authenticity of the characters' suffering.¹³ Whereas the heroes of verbatim theater functioned as vehicles of sincerity, promising to put audiences in touch with the real, in Vyrypaev's postdocumentary plays, all reality claims are to be accepted with caution.

What we have begun to outline, therefore, are the contours of an evolving, multifaceted artistic movement in which new dramatic texts coexist with experiments in documentary, postdocumentary, and even postdramatic theater,¹⁴ and which, in the last two decades, has moved from the peripheries to become an influential force that

has impacted a wide range of media.¹⁵ But what, if anything, can possibly give unity to such a motley phenomenon? What does Vassily Sigarev's *Plasticine*, a play about the violent upbringing of a teenager from the provinces, have in common with Andrey Rodionov and Ekaterina Troepolskaya's slam poetry play *Project "Swan,"* in which migrants must pass a poetic test in order to acquire Russian citizenship? Or Pryazhko's *The Soldier*, a two-sentence "text" about a deserting soldier (it ran for five minutes in Dmitry Volkostrelov's staging at Teatr.doc), and Gremina's *The Brothers Ch.*, a family docudrama based on the life and works of Anton Chekhov? Or finally, to round off the list of plays included in our anthology, Yaroslava Pulinovich's *Somnambulism*, which explores disillusionment with post-Soviet reforms, and Mikhail Durnenkov's *The Blue Machinist*, a modern production play in which machine workers pass the time by composing *haiku*?

It is possible to approach the question of unity from several angles. The first centers on the network of institutions and associations that has served to promote the emergence of New Drama. Rudnev, for example, defines New Drama as "a series of events, actions, festivals, competitions and private initiatives, which are concerned with elevating the prestige of the playwright in the context of contemporary theater."¹⁶ In this respect, New Drama has been fantastically successful. The name itself stems from the New Drama Festival that was first held at the MAT in 2002; although this particular festival no longer exists, other theaters, such as the Meyerhold Center and the Russian Academic Youth Theater, now regularly hold their own. Works by contemporary Russian playwrights made for 22 percent of new dramatic productions in Russia in 2014—still falling behind the classics and works by foreign authors, but a significant improvement over the 1990s.¹⁷ There has also been an upsurge in young writers wanting to write for the theater, prompting Durnenkov to once ironically observe, upon

entering a well-attended playwriting workshop, that Russia has so many playwrights now that they can't all fit into one room.¹⁸ At the same time, despite its expanded influence and ranks, the movement has largely managed to preserve its "coterie" spirit. Many of the playwriting festivals held in Russia today are run by writers, directors, and critics who began their careers in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and who represent the first generation of New Drama. *Teatr.doc* continues to attract young talent through its myriad workshops and laboratories. Finally, there is constant dialogue and movement between companies and theaters—both in the capitals and the provinces—contributing to an atmosphere of exchange and collaboration rather than competition.

Another approach to the question of unity is to consider New Drama as a distinct aesthetic project. Critics point out that works of New Drama often exhibit some combination of the following: hypernaturalistic portrayal of sex and violence; the use of profane language and other forms of "nonnormative" speech; fragmentary (often "filmic") plot structures with little character development or action; a preference for monologic discourse over true dialogue. The heroes of New Drama also tend to fall into one of several categories: the "little man/woman," be it an orphan or a member of a socially marginalized group, who is usually portrayed as a victim or martyr (for this reason, many New Drama texts function as secular hagiographies); the "adulescent" or "kidalt" who is unable or unwilling to grow up; the "migrant" or "wanderer" who finds him- or herself far from home (this could be either an actual place, such as Central Asia, or a metaphorical home, such as "childhood" or "the Soviet Union"). Finally, typical New Drama themes include social anxiety and alienation; disillusionment and the search for truth; the problem of survival in a hostile and violent world; and dream, imitation, and cosplay as means of escape. Of course, this list is not meant to be exhaustive, and some Russian playwrights have begun to explore new themes in

response to a changing social and political context. Still, the model set during the early years of New Drama has been surprisingly stable and it may take a more radical embrace of new forms and themes to keep Russian theater from falling into another malaise.

Fortunately, this has already begun to happen thanks to New Drama's most important unifying trait: its pursuit of the real. "If you cannot change reality, you have the duty, at the very least, to document [*fiksirovat'*] it," Mikhail Ugarov liked to proclaim, repeating a phrase that he attributed to the German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Although the early phase of New Drama privileged the verbal representation of reality by means of written or oral speech, documenting or "fixating" the real today requires finding new forms of communication and new performance practices that critically respond to our increasingly digitized and mediatized world. It is no longer uncommon to see performances without dramatic dialogue or professional actors, experiments with participatory and immersive theater, and site-specific performances that take place in nontraditional spaces. The emergence of new technologies, from the iPhone to VR, has also led theater makers to explore new ways of telling stories, bringing theater into contact with such media as computer gaming and digital art. This does not mean that theater no longer needs provocative, intelligent writing, only that the role of the playwright—as well as that of the actor, the director, the spectator, etc.—has begun to change. Some worry that these transformations pose a direct threat to New Drama—a movement that sought to elevate the prestige of the contemporary playwright. But the fact that many of the boldest theatrical experiments in recent years have come from New Drama artists testifies to the latter's prevailing concern with the real. Thus, when Teatr.doc announced a spinoff company called Transformator.doc, whose stated mission was "to do what runs counter to economic, physical, theatrical, and artistic laws, and to the laws of common sense," and whose

projects have included a partly improvised show that takes place on the streets of Moscow and an adaptation of *The Bacchae* in which naked female actors slap their male counterparts for more than an hour, no one was much surprised (its latest project is a new “School of Aesthetic Extremism”). After all, documentary theater is itself a product of that radical revolution in literature and art that gave us found poetry and the readymade. The adoption of practices from performance art (and other art forms) is thus part of a longstanding tradition that is at present sparking a new wave of interdisciplinary experimentation in Russia.

A more immediate threat facing Russian theater comes from the current political climate in Russia. In fact, the history of New Drama roughly coincides with Vladimir Putin’s hold on power, making it one of the most important documents that we have of this period. On the one hand, the recent resurgence of Russian theater was made possible by the 2000s petroleum boom, which greatly improved economic conditions in Russia and resulted in increased funding for the arts. It was also facilitated by the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev (2008–2012), which, despite its largely cosmetic character, appeared willing to support cultural modernization projects, leading to the construction of innovative theater spaces and the promotion of experimental artists to several important posts. However, much of this support was redirected or withdrawn in the wake of the Russian protest movement (2011–2012) and Russian military intervention in Ukraine (2014–), and Vladimir Putin’s third and fourth presidential terms have been marked by numerous repressive actions directed against theater makers, including instances of public shaming, police raids, forced closures, and criminal prosecution. Teatr.doc was forced to relocate twice in six months between January and May 2015—the first time coinciding with its screening of a documentary film about the war in Ukraine and the second with its premiere of a show about men and women arrested during

the “March of Millions” on May 6, 2012. And at the time of writing, Kirill Serebrennikov, who had been appointed artistic director of the new Gogol Center (formerly, Gogol Theater) in 2012, is awaiting trial with several former colleagues on what most objective observers consider to be patently fabricated embezzlement charges. Provocative new works continue to be written and staged, but there is an air of uncertainty about the future of Russian theater that was not there only a few years ago.

If these obstacles don’t thwart the progress of Russian theater makers, they may lead them to once again reflect on theater’s relationship to the real. The historian Kirill Kobrin has recently observed that the defining feature of contemporary Russian society is its inability to comprehend its own economic, cultural, and political reality, thereby enabling the government to manipulate it for its own ends and keep it from imagining a different future: “Any serious image of the future . . . is grounded in the present and in the ability to perceive it. . . . If the reality of the present is not perceived by the Russian citizen on any level except the everyday one, then there’s simply nothing on which such an image may be grounded.”¹⁹ Kobrin also notes that this state of affairs is partly the result of diminished trust in institutions, suggesting unflattering parallels to the contemporary situation in a number of Western countries, including the United States. With traditional institutions currently in crisis, other organizations have a chance to step in. Comprehending the present in order to imagine alternative futures—this is the mission that theater must embrace today. More than ever, theater must become not only a site of memory but also a public laboratory of the future—a place of collective dreams, discussions, and actions that help build a new social and political consensus. There are encouraging signs that theater makers are accepting the challenge. Only time will tell whether the rest of us will follow suit.

No single anthology can do justice to an artistic movement that is still evolving and that has produced many dozens of texts that deserve serious attention. In the course of our selection process, we strove to balance three main objectives: to highlight those texts that have been instrumental in defining New Drama; to capture New Drama's formal and thematic diversity; and to give some sense of how New Drama has evolved and where it may be heading. We also strove to select works that would appeal not only to students and scholars but also to theater makers who could give them a new life outside of Russia—either on stage or as inspiration for their own quests and dreams. As a result of this process, we have chosen ten texts written between 2000 and 2013 (the year that saw the suppression of the Russian protest movement and the beginning of the Maidan protests in Ukraine). The two translations by Sasha Dugdale had been earlier commissioned by London's Royal Court Theatre and published by Nick Hern Books; we include them here in new versions that have been adapted for American audiences. The rest of the translations were made for the present volume.

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