



Marina Boiko and Anastasia Patlai in Polina Borodina's
The Bolotnaya Square Case (dir. Varvara Faer) at Teatr.doc,
2015. All photographs courtesy of Teatr.doc

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THEATER GAMES

ON SITE AT
TEATR.DOC



Volunteers at the construction site for the new Teatr.doc, summer 2015

On a damp, cloudy morning in mid-June 2015, I found myself inside a dark basement a short walk from Moscow's Kursk Station.

No, I was not hungover from a late-night bender, like the hero of Venedikt Erofeev's cult classic *Moscow to the End of the Line*. Rather, I was one of a dozen or so volunteers helping in the construction effort at Teatr.doc, one of Russia's only remaining independent theaters. Founded in 2002 in an abandoned basement in Patriarch Ponds, Teatr.doc helped revitalize Russian theater with its provocative documentary plays and rebelliously ascetic stagings. However, in the fall of 2014, the theater was forced to leave its home of twelve years and move into a ramshackle *osobniak* (a detached house) on the outskirts of Moscow. Six months and nine premieres later, it was evicted yet again after staging a play about the May 6, 2012, antigovernment protest on Bolotnaya Square. Creeping defiantly back toward the center, but still poised on the edge of the cultural abyss that extends beyond Moscow's Garden Ring, Teatr.doc was now moving into a space whose very location testified to its uncertain predicament.

I came to Russia this summer on a grant from the American Philosophical Society,

an organization whose membership once included Catherine the Great's close friend (and theater patron) Princess Dashkova. I had long been interested in Russian theater but did not feel the urge to write about it until I watched a recording, on YouTube, of a performance that took place at the original Teatr.doc. Entitled *Khamsud: The Sequel*, it was conceived in response to the sentencing, only days earlier, of three members of the punk rock band Pussy Riot. Just as with the original protest action at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, I was struck by the aesthetics no less than the politics of the performance. There was no script, no actors in the traditional sense, no fourth wall separating the audience from the stage. There was no *mimesis*; rather the one-off performance took the form of a dialogue between the audience and a panel of witnesses. As Mikhail Ugarov, the artistic director and cofounder of Teatr.doc, explained, the Pussy Riot trial was too unwieldy to dramatize. As a result, he and director Varvara Faer came up with an unusual format: something between a press conference and a public tribunal. The audience would vote on the dramatis personae, whose motives and character traits the witnesses (defense lawyers,

family members, journalists present in court during the trial) would then break down with the aim of eventually handing this material to some future playwright. The list of characters turned out to include the judge, the defendants' parents, and a police Rottweiler that famously threw up in court. This playful conceit lent the performance the air of a mischievous game, creating a temporary safe space where the public could build group solidarity and vent their anger. When a group of Orthodox activists suddenly arrived at the theater midway through the show, their attempts to break up the performance were quickly drowned out by laughter.

I arrived in Moscow in mid-May and therefore did not witness the large police presence at the theater during the premiere of *The Bolotnaya Square Case*. When I attended the show a couple of weeks later, after Teatr.doc's landlord had torn up their rental agreement under pressure from the authorities, there were two officers milling around the entrance to the theater. Despite all the buildup, I was struck by the relatively low-key nature of the performance. Written by Polina Borodina, the play is based on interviews conducted with family members of those convicted in the

Bolotnaya Square case. Four actors take turns speaking lines from the interview transcripts, sometimes reclining in a mesh hammock, sometimes unwrapping candies while seated behind a small kitchen table (objects passed to prisoners during visits must first be unwrapped). We hear the words of a mother whose son was arrested at the protest and of a young woman who navigated the bureaucracy in order to marry her sweetheart in prison. All of this is done with the utmost restraint, lending the stories a sense of melancholy intimacy that would have been hard to achieve had they been spoken dramatically. And yet, despite the poignancy of the monologues and the naturalness of the acting, I felt that the play never managed to forge the kind of communal bond with the audience that was so powerfully on display in *Khamsud*. When, at the end of the performance, the actress Anastasia Patlai tried to lead the audience in a rendition of “A Wagon Rushes on a Dusty Road” (a revolutionary song from the 1860s), her increasingly desperate gesticulations were met largely with silence.

Faer, who in addition to writing and directing also acts in many of Teatr.doc’s productions, including *The Bolotnaya Square Case*, suggested one possible reason for this. I met with her at the theater on June 22, while a somber celebration was taking place next door to commemorate the closing of the old Teatr.doc. Among those gathered around a small buffet table were Ugarov; the poet Andrei Rodionov, who days earlier gave an uncanny performance as Socrates in a verbatim staging of *Plato’s Symposium*; and the playwright Maxim Kurochkin, who plays the real-life Belarus poet and activist Vladimir Neklyae in Elena Gremina’s *Two in Your House*. “There is still an interest in politics among theater audiences,” Faer told me when I asked her to gauge the mood of the public in the wake of Putin’s return to power, “but the nature of this interest has changed.” According to Faer, audiences no longer want to hear shrill cries directed at them from the stage; they interpret them as a sign of hysteria. Instead, they want “warm” plays that center on the experiences of ordi-

nary individuals suddenly confronted with injustice, which is what the theater tried to deliver with *The Bolotnaya Square Case*.

Of the ten plays that I attended at Teatr.doc this summer, only two, *The Bolotnaya Square Case* and *Two in Your House*, directly addressed instances of recent political injustice. The other plays were either about universal human themes—love, infidelity, faith—or about historical subjects, such as the Fall of Constantinople. According to Faer, such plays acquire a special significance within the current political context. “Putin’s politics is aimed at driving a wedge between people,” she told me, “at trashing, slinging mud, spreading meanness, muddying the waters.” Faer recently experienced the consequences of such tactics firsthand, when a small group of actors in Pskov wrote an open letter to the minister of culture denouncing her play *The Bathhouse Attendant*. (She is currently raising funds in order to stage the play with a new cast at Teatr.doc.) Teatr.doc wants to counteract such developments, she says, by fostering humanistic



Anastasia Patlai in Polina Borodina’s *The Bolotnaya Square Case* (dir. Varvara Faer) at Teatr.doc, 2015

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values such as solidarity, friendship, and nobility. The trick is to do so without becoming didactic.

This approach can be seen in two shows that premiered this spring. The first, *Lear-Klesch*, is a witness theater show starring Marina Klescheva, a former convict who rediscovered her childhood talent for performance when Teatr.doc visited her prison colony in 2002. Raised by an abusive father and a mother who doted more on her older sister, Marina started skipping school early and fell in with the wrong crowd. She was given a four-year prison term for assault and robbery in her twenties, and was sentenced again, this time for twelve years, after failing to find her way in society upon her release. A larger-than-life, self-deprecating charmer of a woman, Marina interlaces her reminiscences about life in the prison colony with songs and dramatic scenes that she performed for the colony's "psychotherapeutic theater." She was already near the end of her second sentence when a young psychologist brought in Varvara Faer and Shakespeare. In the show, Marina tells of her terror upon learning that she would play the lead role in *King Lear*; of how she would prepare by suddenly breaking into character with other inmates; of how she fell in love with Shakespeare's Sonnet 147, its piercing concluding couplet ("For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright, / Who art as black as hell, as dark as night") reminding her of a girlfriend that had betrayed her trust. More than a case study in drama therapy, Marina's story is about the ability of any person to overcome circumstances

and to discover her better self. Her lesson is no less applicable to the streets of Moscow than to the colony.

The second show is *Forgiving Betrayal*, a participatory play written and directed by Elena Gremina (Ugarov's wife and managing director of Teatr.doc). It features two young couples that reminisce about their experiences of sexual and emotional betrayal with an explicitness rarely encountered on the Russian stage. As the play unfolds, the actors repeatedly interrupt their stories with uncomfortable questions to the audience: *Have you ever cheated on anyone? Have you ever peeked at your partner's e-mails without their consent? Have you ever known that your friend was being betrayed but did not tell them?* At first hesitantly, then with growing eagerness, audience members share their intimate experiences with the actors. The fourth wall breaks down, creating a space of discovery and communication. "The true underlying topic here is decency," observed the American theater critic John Freedman in his review for the *Moscow Times*. "What does it take for a person to be decent, and what has to happen for someone to cross the line and lose it? And when decency is gone, what comes next?" The success of each performance rests on the audience's willingness to overcome personal fears in

order to join in the collective exploration of these fundamental questions.

Shows like *Lear-Klesch* and *Forgiving Betrayal* bring real people (and their stories) out onto the stage, breaking down the partition between professional actor and passive public. As such, they also challenge us to rethink theatrical convention. "We are oppositional only from the point of view of the regime," Ugarov told me when I met with him at the new theater late in June. "But otherwise we have no yearning to be in the opposition. Except in the sphere of aesthetics." What drives Ugarov and his collaborators is the search for the boundary separating "theater" from "already-not-theater" and "not-yet-theater." This could mean constructing plays around documentary material, such as court transcripts and interviews; cultivating a deliberately nontheatrical acting style; or doing away with professional actors altogether, as in *Lear-Klesch* and *AkynOpera*, a witness theater show featuring real migrant workers from Central Asia. More recent work increasingly exhibits the influence not only of such internationally acclaimed participatory theater companies as Rimini Protokoll (their street-theater show *Remote Moscow* was a huge hit this summer) but also of key figures in the history of performance art. A good example of this is *Silence on an Assigned Theme*, a show devised by Vsevolod Lisovsky, in which audience members are given an hour to ruminate in silence on a theme assigned to them beforehand. Channeling both John Cage's *4'33*" and recent work by Marina

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Varvara Faer in Polina Borodina's *The Bolotnaya Square Case* (dir. Varvara Faer) at Teatr.doc, 2015

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Abramovic, the show asks anew what we mean when we speak of theater.

Provocative as such projects may be aesthetically, it is unlikely that they are responsible for Teatr.doc's problems with the authorities. Rather, the harassment of Teatr.doc is obviously linked to more openly political productions, such as *The Bolotnaya Square Case*, which are perceived as a threat because they address issues that are distorted or covered up by official propaganda. According to Ugarov, there is currently a war being waged within Russia over the representation of reality. The mere appearance of the words "Maidan" or "Bolotnaya" in a title is enough to provoke a reaction. As he explained in a recent interview: "If someone has committed a crime, it's not very pleasant for the criminal to be reminded of it, to be asked, 'Why did you choke that young woman?'" Believing that public interest in politics is bound to become sharper the worse things get, Ugarov told me that the time for true protest theater in Russia has yet to come. And in the meantime? Ugarov likes to cite a quote by the German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder that has done much to shape the theater's philosophy: "If you don't have the power to change the situation, you have the duty, at the very least, to bear witness to it."

Teatr.doc's continued ability to bear witness to Russian social and political hardships will depend, in part, on the lengths the regime is prepared to go to enforce its increasingly repressive cultural politics. In an article on June 17, 2015, published in the newspaper *Izvestiya*, ominously entitled "Whoever Doesn't Feed His Own Culture Will Feed a Foreign Army," the Russian minister of culture, Vladimir Medinsky, laid out the most detailed vision yet of how the State wants to redefine the relationship between art and power. Observing that culture has "a strategic importance for the development of the country," Medinsky uses the exam-

ple of theater to argue that the State must not distribute public funds for projects it deems to be in conflict with "traditional" values such as family and service to the fatherland. "The State does not forbid anything in the realm of art," he writes, "but neither does it finance everything" (a claim obviously belied by the continued persecution of Teatr.doc, an independent theater). The effect of this policy, were it to be enforced, would be to drive out experiment and freethinking from what has arguably been the most innovative realm of post-Soviet Russian culture. Medinsky illustrates his reasoning by means of an analogy with medicine (ironically, another area that has recently seen large budgetary cuts): "If you were to fall ill and come to a regional clinic, would you want to be treated with 'non-traditional' medicine? Would you want to be a test case for a new, 'experimental' miracle device? I doubt it. . . . For lovers of the alternative there is non-traditional medicine, which is not paid for by the State. And it's the same in art. Only with one difference: a non-traditional artist experiments not on the body of one patient, but on the souls of thousands and thousands."

The almost casual nod to Stalin here (cf. his famous line that writers are "engineers of human souls") is probably not accidental, for the most alarming part of Medinsky's article is that it openly encourages the kind of "citizen activism" (as he calls it) that Russia hasn't seen since the 1930s. As a positive model he mentions a recent exhibit organized by the group Art Without Borders (an Orwellian name, given the fact that its activities are aimed at curtailing expression), in which large photographs of controversial theater productions were displayed together with the amounts they received in public funding. The exhibit was quickly taken down after drawing loud protests from the



Tatiana Sikorskaia (*left*), Ruslana Tolkach, and Dmitry Krivochurov in Elena Gremina's *Forgiving Betrayal* at Teatr.doc, 2015

artistic community, but the same group later filed a separate complaint with the office of the public prosecutor, which led to the mailing of official summonses to the directors of six Moscow theaters. The latter were instructed to provide information on twelve recent productions, most of which had been featured in the exhibit, including Konstantin Bogomolov's *An Ideal Husband*, Konstantin Raikin's *Every Shade of Blue*, six shows by Kirill Serebrennikov, and Timofei Kuliabin's "blasphemous" staging of *Tannhäuser*. The fact that most or all of the twelve productions were not in the repertoires of the theaters in question (*Tannhäuser* was staged in Novosibirsk!) did not seem to give pause to the authors of the summonses.

In light of these developments, it may be that the regime's treatment of Teatr.doc—a small theater without the powerful backers of a Moscow Art Theatre or a Gogol-Center—was a trial run for a broadening set of repressive actions. If there is a strategy in play (and not everyone agrees there is), it seems to be not so much to ban undesirable cultural activity outright—officially, the State played no part in Teatr.doc's latest eviction—but to sow division, create uncertainty, and wear

down opponents by forcing them to deal with distracting and costly tasks such as relocating and answering summonses. It is in effect the same strategy that has been used against the political opposition, whose most visible leader, Alexei Navalny, has spent much of the last few years battling fabricated charges in court. "I'm an actor with a university degree, and I'm here painting walls," one young man told me while taking a break from construction work. It was six o'clock. He had been volunteering at the site all day and still had to meet Ugarov an hour later for evening rehearsal.

So how does "a theater where no one acts/plays [*teatr, gde ne igraiuť*]" come out on top in this game of attrition with the regime? I posed this question to Ugarov as we sat in the smaller of the two theater spaces at the new Teatr.doc, our conversation occasionally interrupted by a ringing phone or the entrance of an actor. The authorities were shocked by how quickly the theater was able to mobilize, he said, noting that, with the help of their community of colleagues and volunteers, they were able to hold a premiere at the new theater on the very next day after playing their last show at the old one. In Ugarov's view, the two evictions did not have the ef-

fect intended by the authorities. Instead of dividing people, it brought them together, consolidated them. "They don't believe in the consolidation of people," he said, "but we do. This is the only thing that we can count on." Recently Teatr.doc has even turned to crowd-funding, promising new artistic and social projects—"regardless of the conditions and confluence of circumstances on Russian territory"—as part of its "social contract" with the public. If this sounds like defiant rhetoric, it is. But this does not mean that Teatr.doc has lost its penchant for playfulness. As Ugarov observed while pulling out yet another cigarette from his pack of Vogue Slims: "The main thing is to not give in to the pathos and seriousness of revolutionary struggle." ■

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Maksim Hanukai, a 2015–16 postdoctoral fellow at the Harriman Institute, is completing his book manuscript "Pushkin's Tragic Visions," based on his doctoral dissertation (Columbia, 2014).

In March 2013 the Harriman Institute hosted Teatr.doc, which performed The Sequel, a witness theater piece about Pussy Riot.