

Yury Butusov and Maria Shevtsova

In Conversation in Apocalyptic Times

Undoubtedly one of the most prominent and most important Russian directors of the past two decades, Yury Butusov here refers to several landmarks of his artistic trajectory, gradually revealing a sense of *oeuvre*, of a body of work connected by a distinctive worldview. Not all of his productions of exceptional significance are cited here, and *Flight* (2015), at the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow, not having found its rightful place here, appears separately at the end. This Conversation, while intentionally taking a wide perspective, nevertheless focuses on production details so as to foreground various artistic qualities that distinguish his approach. Butusov discusses at some length what constitutes his directorial method and methodology, stressing, above all, the primacy of creative freedom for his actors and himself from which emerge complex and highly charged theatre constructions. Butusov, who is against war as such, speaks of his position on the Russian-Ukrainian war, which led to his resignation in 2018 from the artistic directorship of the Lensoviet Theatre in St Petersburg. He became Principal Director of the Vakhtangov, alongside the acclaimed Rimas Tuminas, Artistic Director of this theatre. Tuminas resigned from his post in spring 2022. Butusov and his family left Russia for Paris, and Butusov resigned from the Vakhtangov in November 2022. His production of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is to be premiered at the Russian- and Lithuanian-speaking Vilnius Old Theatre in September 2023. This conversation took place on 23 March and 27 April 2023 on Zoom, and was translated from the Russian and edited by Maria Shevtsova.

Yury Butusov has received numerous prestigious awards, of which seven are from the most coveted of them – the Golden Mask National Theatre Award and Festival. Five were for Best Director: *Waiting for Godot* (1999), *The Seagull* (2012), *The Three Sisters* (2015), *Uncle Vanya* (2018), and *Peer Gynt* (2021). One was for *R* (2023), for the best production of large forms (distinguished by the Golden Mask from small-scale works). In 2014, *Macbeth. Cinema* (based fully on Shakespeare) and *The Good Person of Szechwan* received a Golden Mask for 'research into a new and unique theatre language'. Other awards include the prestigious St Petersburg prize, the Golden Sofit, for *Woyzeck* (1997) and *Town. Marriage. Gogol* (2015); the International Stanislavsky Award for *The Caretaker* (1998); the Crystal Turandot for, among others, *King Lear*, directed at the Satirikon (2006); the Spectators' Star for, among others, *Hamlet* at the Lensoviet (2018) and *King Lear* at the Vakhtangov (2021); and still more, among which are *Cabaret Brecht* (2016) and Brecht's *Drums in the Night* (2018), both of which feature in this Conversation.

Key terms: methodology, research in the raw, music, rhythm, variations, freedom, war.

Maria Shevtsova *Hello, Yura! [diminutive of Yury] How lovely it is to be with you again. Thank you for saying we can take our time. You are so busy, and breathing space to speak together is so valuable for me since I think of my work as providing an archive for the future, for the people who will follow us and want to find out what kind of theatre marked our field and our lives. You already know that I would like our conversation to give an overall view of your work, so let's see how we go.*

*When you started your big theatre career, you already had a smaller but very significant one behind you – with an award-winning *Waiting**

*for Godot in 1996, which was your graduation production from the St Petersburg State Theatre Arts Academy; and there were other noted productions such as *The Caretaker* (Harold Pinter, 1997) and *Caligula* (Albert Camus, 1998) at the Lensoviet Theatre in St Petersburg. But you showed the wider, fuller scale of your creativity when you came to the Satirikon in Moscow, working, in particular, with Konstantin Raikin, the theatre's Artistic Director. Then came repeated engagements with the Moscow Art Theatre, the Pushkin Theatre, and the Vakhtangov Theatre, accompanied by many more prestigious awards,*

most splendidly from the Golden Mask Theatre Festival. In recent years came the Russian Academic Youth Theatre (RAMT). All of them, together with the Satirikon, were and are Moscow theatres of world renown.

How did you feel when you first started to work with Raikin, a 'star' and son of a famous, venerated actor [Arkady Raikin]? Did you feel that a new world was opening up for you? That you were coming face to face with actors with a different training from yours, and with a way of seeing things differently from the actors in the Lensoviet, some of whom you pretty well developed over a number of years? How did you begin what must have been a new journey for you?

Yury Butusov The first show that I did at the Satirikon was *Macbett* [Eugene Ionesco, 2002], but Raikin did not perform in it. We first met when he came to see *Waiting for Godot* at the Lensoviet, and he invited me to come to his theatre. It was a long time ago, but my feeling is that it was relatively easy because he is a very democratic and open person, and honest in art and life.

Macbett was unbelievably successful. People really loved it, and Kostya [diminutive of Konstantin] loved it very much. It is a particular case in my story – not that spectators have ever been bad to me, but these spectators especially loved it. They came to see it again and again. I never ever saw such huge quantities of flowers [from spectators] after performances.

My timetable was tight. I had just returned from a premiere of mine in Poland and, on the very next day, Kostya and I began to rehearse *Richard III* (2004). When you are constantly at work, you don't have to worry about things and, psychologically speaking, this is gold for me, for my psyche. We met alone for two or three weeks – an assistant took notes – and we worked on the text for about ten hours a day. We consulted all the available translations and did a compilation; we added texts, and effectively did a new translation with new sense and meaning, and with the right reverberations for both of us. It was such a warm period: we sat together, drank tea, and became very good friends. This really set the template for all our future relations. Kostya

had dreamt of playing this role all his life. He is always fired by work, always switched on, and always connected to it. He loves sweets, so we stocked up on sweets of all kinds to keep us going. It was really touching.

Let me go back a minute. I'm curious to hear why Macbett had such a massively positive response. Was it the theme of dictatorship?

You know, it was because, at the time, the country was coming out of a black period, a black streak, and the light and joy in the production coincided with people's wants and wishes. This was, of course, tied up with the appearance – this may be immodest to say – but with the appearance of a new theatre mood, a theatre of *playing*, theatre that went out beyond the frameworks of psychological theatre. The theme of dictatorship was there, but it was a very light, lyrical production. It had a kind of beauty about it, humour, and brightness (Figure 1). Only at the end, in the Emperor's monologue, did it speak of what we are going through now. There was a paradox in it bound up with me. I do not peddle kinds of 'social' . . . Well, I have in recent productions, but not then. It was an unbelievably beautiful production – tender.

You surprise me! I know this play only in its productions as satire, as some kind of grotesque piece, and so stylized accordingly.

Yes, that's absolutely true, but the paradox lies between what happens and my attitude to this play when I read it. People were so drawn to this production; there was so much warmth in it, such gentle humour, love for the theatre. I love this production. I could not stay for its last, closing performance because I felt I would not be able to cope with my emotions. I had seen the penultimate performance and had found myself in tears. It was my first production in Moscow, and since, at the time, I did not yet have many productions under my belt, I was able to see it every time it was performed.

Your account of your own responsiveness as a director to this work is endearing, but I must say, it is you who gave the work the attributes you cite.



Figure 1. *Macbeth*. The Satirikon Theatre, Moscow. Photograph: Igor Zakharin. Copyright courtesy of Igor Zakharin.

I have not, for instance, seen so much as a trace of gentleness of any kind in any of the productions of Macbeth that I have seen.

Yes, it is seen as a social play, or as some sort of political pamphlet. I have often been criticized for not pursuing this dimension – also in *Caligula* and, later, *Richard III*. Critics have often scolded me for ‘over-humanizing’ and seeing ‘too much humanity’ in plays where satire and politics appear.

I certainly understand this, but then directors put something of themselves, of their spirit, into the productions they make.

True, but critics often disagree with this type of contribution. They have their own opinions. They think we should speak of actuality, whereas ‘actuality’, for me, lies in the humanity of human beings. The ‘beyond-human’, the other-than-human, does not interest me in whatever kind of theatre it may be – documentary theatre, social

theatre. I am concerned with the paradoxes of the human heart.

I’d like to go back to *Richard III*. After Raikin and I had finished working on the text, we went onto the stage, where the whole production would be constructed. It’s a voluminous space. The production also ran counter to the usual view that *Richard III* was about power (Figure 2). This cannot go away – it is there in the text – but we needed to find the human trigger behind this ruthless, monstrous figure. We found it in his childhood, in his relations with his mother, and in the fact that he was not a loved son: this is all in the text. We were not concerned with justifying or legitimating anything, but, for me, this human approach was indispensable. Spectators also loved this production: it was impossible to get tickets for it. It played like that for eleven years and only went out of the repertoire because of the physical burden of the role – that crooked leg and the enormous hump that Raikin wore on his back. Raikin always leads by intuition and he closed the show down, despite its immense popularity.



Figure 2. *Richard III*. The Satirikon Theatre, Moscow. Konstantin Raikin in the title role. Photograph: Igor Zakharin. Copyright courtesy of Igor Zakharin.

I am not an easy person to deal with in rehearsals. For me, a production is born during rehearsals. I do not think it out beforehand, and that is why I often change things. [When rehearsing,] we frequently perform contradictory things, which is why actors have to be very flexible, mobile, and have to remember what they are doing, in case we come back to it later on. This is a rather agonizing process but, if it works out, the result makes it worthwhile, and the actors begin to like this way of working.

I have to go through many variations and actually see it on the stage; I can't have it in my head. It's difficult in that the actors have to perform a range of versions, somehow remember them, and each version requires strength [of performance], so bringing *Richard III* to its premiere was difficult, and demanded great physical effort from Kostya. During the work process, I go into very tight contact with the actors and into very honest relations with them, and then we become close. It doesn't mean that we become friends and hang out or

go to restaurants together. We simply become close on a kind of molecular level.

I'd say that's a deep human bonding through intuition, empathy – through qualities that are invisible. I don't know how else to put it.

Well, that's what this *Richard* was like.

And what, for you, was your King Lear like? I have seen this one [Satirikon, 2006]. It was also a famous production and also ran for many years.

Yes, I think they took it off only three years ago. I think Kostya may have sensed the coming of new times and that the production needed renovation.

Well, what did you look for in such a complex play? You, as director, don't begin from abstractions. You work with your actors physically. Yes, you talk, you discuss, what you have tried out, but the key, it seems to me, is in the flow of doing.

I think that there is such a thing as an intuitive premonition. It arises when I read material. I have my life circumstances [as they are at a given time] and also actors around me whom I think about, and an internal mechanism gets going as I read a text: emotions begin to stir, as does a sense of excitement. I begin to feel some sort of vibration, not because I think, 'Oh, how relevant this is to what's going on now,' but because the internal connections are subtler. I read plays, I might grasp them, but they do not thrill me. When I am thrilled, I realize there is something important in the play and know that that is the one I have to work with. At this moment I kind of hear a sound of birth coming. This is a crucial moment for me – a signal of choice – but it doesn't always happen easily: I seem to need to experience conception and birth rather than meaning. I cannot find better words to express it.

But often I will start from another play. When I began *King Lear*, I started to rehearse [Gogol's] *The Government Inspector*. After

several rehearsals, I began to understand that I could not do it and had to work on *Lear*. The step that I first took was not the right one, but it was a necessary one for me.

And Raikin?

I think Raikin was a little taken aback. He wasn't quite ready for it. I suspect he thought *Lear* should be older, but I often choose actors whose age does not correspond with their role (Figure 3).

It happened in King Lear at the Vakhtangov Theatre (2021), where a young actor [Artur Ivanov], well under the age of the title role, played it. The same holds for Gloucester [Viktor Dobronravov]. It's a very different King Lear, in any case.

The stage at the Vakhtangov was a completely different kind of stage, and I finally understood that age has no meaning in the theatre. It seems to me that a production has to be



Figure 3. *King Lear*. The Satirikon Theatre, Moscow. Konstantin Raikin in the title role. Photograph Ken Reynolds. Copyright courtesy of Ken Reynolds and the Satirikon.

keyed in with my life – not only with my life but also with the actors' lives. I see how a person changes [working on a role or roles] and age difference vanishes. You get a real 'high', a real kick, out of seeing how this human being changes; how this being becomes another person. It's not that he/she plays the role, but lives *with* the role; not lives *in* the role but *with* it, and this life fills the rehearsals, fills the productions, and changes the productions.

I observe my personal changes as well as those of the people near me. This is not merely work – it's my life [and so] the production is not a production on the stage but a piece of my life, which is why I choose my actors slowly and carefully. I understand that I will be living in *these* circumstances with *these* people in *their* world for three or four months. This is the reason why I generally do not take on actors who shoot films in parallel time, even though they might be good actors. I find it impossible to do so because I need that person to be with me. My life cannot stop and wait: he/she might be away for two weeks, but I cannot throw two weeks of my life away. Time, in this sense, is costly.

Agreed, time has its price, but you are also talking about the intensity of life.

Yes, that too. I have to say – this is egoistic: it is my wish to live. I do this for myself.

You might well, but you do it with others.

Of course, of course I do, but I am conscious of the fact that it is egoism. Yet it is an egoism that I cannot live without.

Well then, given this perspective of 'my life', what was the impulse of 'my life' that prompted you to stage King Lear – a totally new King Lear, moreover – during a pandemic? 2021 was still the time of Covid-19.

Well, I'm a grown-up person, after all [laughs], and I understood that there would be a catastrophe. I understood that we were galloping towards an abyss – that was absolutely the case – and the theme of my production was not Lear. It was the tempest – the tempest that

would destroy us: tempest and death. You asked what motivated the first *King Lear*, and I did not answer you: there were Lear, Kostya, and the madness of a human being. Madness, while taking its course, was, in some sense, Lear's journey as his actions and transgressions took *their* course to a kind of cleansing. The second *King Lear* is not this at all.

Yet, given the kind of human being that I am, it is important for me that there be some sort of light coming towards the end of a performance, some kind of hope; and I [as the director] give myself this task. I went through a stage when I asked myself why I sought light when it wasn't true, when reality holds little hope. The light in the second *King Lear* was tied up with despair: the tempest was a terrifying, annihilating force.

This Covid is not an accident. I don't mean this in a conspiratorial sense but in the sense of the calm before the storm. You know how it is. You are walking and there is tension in the air. It is incredibly quiet, and there is no wind. You *smell* the coming of the storm. Covid was that pause before the tempest. It was a terrifying time.

You show Lear dancing, dancing in the tempest. You, as director, regularly use a tremendous amount of music, much of it rock, metal, club, disco, and generally high-beat, fast-beat music, but I don't ever recall hearing you foreground 'cool' jazz in quite such a pronounced way. It was astounding suddenly to hear a solo trumpet, played firmly, confidently, but with a haunting quality, as if it were in counterpoint to Lear's solo – two voices . . . Well, actually, no: three voices, since the tempest was a voice in itself.

It seems to me that the trumpet was the Fool's voice. The Fool never abandons Lear; he is always beside him. All of them are fools in some way. The Fool is the zone of truth, and the 'fool zone' touches them all. This trumpet is the human voice in this wild nature, which is beside him and tries to stop him. It is difficult to explain – these are emotional things – but the Fool is very important in this story. The Fool and Cordelia are one and the same actor [Yevgeniya Kregzhde].

Why did you do this?

It's a well-known story [from Shakespeare's time] . . . [Laughter]. I didn't invent it.

Yes, but you didn't have to use it!

True, I could not have used it, but it seemed to me that there was colossal meaning in it. I wanted the Fool never to disappear: the Fool cannot disappear. Cordelia also never abandons Lear, although she goes away and comes back only at the end – and it's a long, long road. It seems right to me that she should become the voice of truth: she becomes Lear's conscience, his *heart*.

Is this an instance of what you were talking about when you said that you needed light in a production?

Yes, of course. I'm a rather pessimistic person in life. I live with this light in my productions: they are my light. They are not show business, not routine, slick entertainment, but

theatre, with theatre's depth and its call to heart and thought.

Dance, for you, must be a related notion of your 'light'. I am thinking about the coloured floating balloons among which Cordelia dances towards the end.

In this childlike device there is a great deal of happiness; it is dramatic, too. There is also [at the very end of the performance] a huge sphere – a huge moon, but more than a moon since it is also the world, the globe, and refers as well to Shakespeare's Globe (Figure 4).

It is a tremendously beautiful, highly evocative image, which really can only be seen as apocalyptic, suggesting a vision of a beautiful planet threatened by disaster. Your 'light' is shaded by darkness, also physically by what, in this closing image, could well be alluding to an eclipse. 'Disaster' – your earlier 'catastrophe' – is also where you place Covid. [Butusov and Shevtsova remain silent.]



Figure 4. *King Lear*. The Vakhtangov Theatre, Moscow. Yevgeniya Kregzhde (centre) as the Fool/Cordelia; Artur Ivanov (right) as Lear. Photograph: Aleksandra Torgushnikova. Copyright courtesy of Aleksandra Torgushnikova.

I would like you to talk a little about rhythm. You are a very musical director, and I do not just mean your use of music and song, which completely dominate your Macbeth. Cinema (premiered 2012 at the Lensoviet) and is certainly dominant in The Seagull (2011), your second-last production at the Satirikon, to date. I also mean the musicality of your productions – the ebb, the flow, the phrasing, the cadence, and, perhaps, above all, the sensation of rhythmic composition emanating from them, which, as I think about it, brings to mind Stanislavsky's emphasis on the cardinal importance of rhythm for any theatre work.

There is a short scene in your Vakhtangov Lear that is a simple example of how rhythm might manifest itself in the theatre. I refer to the scene where Goneril and Reagan throw their father out with his belongings and retinue. You merge the two separate scenes in Shakespeare into one. The sisters throw out long wooden planks, one after another, from their respective sides of the stage, and they do this in relay: a plank thrown from one side is followed by a plank thrown from the other side, and so on, in alternation. Your directorial hand here is in the coordination of the syncopated rhythms of the actual throwing, as well as in the beats of the movement as a whole. The rhythm of the dialogue is like a bassline for the composition. The musicality created by the actors not only caught the spectator's ear but it also enhanced the metaphor of the wooden planks for people and objects. Really, it is a simple and straightforward scene, but altogether remarkable.

Rhythm is one of my most important components, if not *the* most important component, of my theatre, over and above its sense or aesthetic effects. Rhythm is vital, but not just because I love music. Directing is, in fact, music. I would like, here, to be a musician.

You are certainly a musician in The Seagull! I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw you break through the framed, paper 'walls' you use frequently in this production, most of them facing the audience. I am talking about the production's very end. You surged out of these walls with ferocious energy, belting out, shouting Treplev's monologue from Act IV, microphone in hand and gyrating your body with absolute ease, just like a rock star! And how you danced and danced,

accomplishing amazing physical movements, including jumping up a 'wall' and running up this 'wall' – dare-devil stuff with such grace and power, as if you were a fully trained dancer! You were totally fabulous, and the numerous young spectators in the audience went wild, itching to get up and dance too – rock-concert style. [Butusov, when I saw him do this feat, was in his mid-fifties.] (Figures 5 and 6).

Well, well, look at that! It would have been worth doing the whole show just for that text alone! [Butusov is here joking about the praise he has just received.] It was an egotistical realization of my dreams. I dreamed of being a rock singer when I was a kid, but God did not grant me this possibility, so perhaps I am realizing it now!

On the whole – if we are going to talk about music – I approach a production as I would a symphony, although there may not be any music in it [the proposed production]. The actors' speech may resound; various sounds may sound out [in particular]. As far as I am concerned, a production is not a diving-down into sections of text. My head is constructed in such a way that I conceive of it as a unified whole. So I do not see music as an add-on, as something, for instance, that you turn on to brighten up a scene. I don't think like that.

For me, musicality is the aim: it is not an illustrative device for a character or a situation. I always experiment, and, in my recent productions, [Ibsen's] *Peer Gynt* (2019) and [Florian Zeller's] *The Son* (2020), all the actors sing, going from Muse and Rammstein to Icelandic folklore, Bach, and Monteverdi. Generally speaking, I am surprised that I am not asked to stage opera! . . . [joking tone] Although this did in fact happen before the war. It would have been Prokofiev, but it did not happen.

Apropos *Peer Gynt*, I am often reproached for being illogical, for making an author's theatre, for the appearance in my shows of motifs and associations that, at first glance, do not seem to be related to their subject. I would like to explain this so-called 'inappropriate behaviour'. I use, in the musical tissue of this production, the compositions of the great Belgian



Figure 5. *The Seagull*. The Satirikon Theatre, Moscow. Yury Butusov (centre) as Konstantin Treplev's alter ego. Photograph: Aleksandr Ivanishin. Copyright courtesy of Aleksandr Ivanishin.

singer Jacques Brel. This could look merely like a modernist flourish, but of course, that is not what it is. It is a seriously and deeply substantiated decision that flowed from the meaning of the play.

For me, the most important and most powerful motif concerning the life of Peer Gynt, the character, involves passion, rebellion, a passion for travel, knowing the world, and spiritual search. And it seemed to me that this related the imagined Peer Gynt to the real Jacques Brel – with Brel's tireless spiritual work, his search for sense and meaning, his search for triumph over disappointments, and his return home from these wanderings to his own place and himself, emotionally and philosophically speaking: all this ties him to Ibsen's Peer Gynt.

I chose the song 'Ces gens-là' ['Those People'] because, as I see it, in that song this motif [that I have been talking about] resounds clearly and distinctly. The last line, 'Il faut que je rentre chez moi' ['I must go back

home'] does not carry immediate, daily-life meaning, but becomes philosophy, poetry, and the very stuff of life. I see a poet and an artist in Peer Gynt, as was Jacques Brel.

Yes, I get it, all of it. You know, catching association and inferences – it's like elliptical thinking – and not necessarily what people want to do first. [Reflective pause.] Peer Gynt came out just about the time Covid hit the universe, preventing me from travelling to Moscow. But I did see The Son during the 2021 Golden Mask online [NTQ 148], and think it is marvellous in its ellipses and also in its delicate, almost ghost-like quality, in parts. A song towards the end of the production – yes, I assumed that the actress sang it live – contributes considerably to the sensation I felt of flashback: her very physical appearance – a glamorous blonde – recalls a totally different past from the production's evoked present.

*Let us go back to the thread that we have been weaving. Having seen a good number of your works, *The Seagull*, on reflection, seems to*



Figure 6. *The Seagull*. Closing scene at the MITsp (São Paulo International Theatre Festival), 2015. Photograph: Ligia Jardim. Copyright courtesy of Ligia Jardim and the MITsp (São Paulo International Theatre Festival).

demonstrate how you construct your productions (at least from the 2010s onwards). I won't say you make it from études but through trying-and-testing [proby] scenes that you all invent together, on the go, in rehearsals. Or, to put it a little differently, highlighted evidence of process is embedded in the very production itself, and this – shall we say – 'display' of process marks your productions of the 2010s – especially Macbeth. Cinema, for example. A great deal of spontaneity appears to be involved in this rehearsal process – your spontaneity too, of course, as a director. It is as if every piece is an experiment – an attempt – yet it looks to be more than a studio-style show [pokaz] or demonstration, when the compositional process is shown to the public. It looks like a search, like research in the raw. Is that right?

That's absolutely right. I always search. Everybody knows the word 'étude', and I have struggled with it for some time because it seems to me that we do not do études, which are approaches to roles. We try out

scenes from different angles and take up different tasks in search of differing moods and meanings – we knead the clay – and begin to agree on things. This is something bigger than a school étude, when people check something out on themselves. We don't work with improvised texts. Our attempts [proby] are based on the text of a given author, and we break down [analyze] our attempts. This is a path to the word.

Is that how you end up in your Seagull with two Mashas and two Treplevs, who speak and play the text in their own way, distinguished from their 'twin'?

In one situation there were three Ninas! But to put it accurately, there is *one* Treplev in the production and he is Timofey Tribuntsev, who carries the main theme. It is as in music: there is the leitmotif and there are the echoes. At the end, where the Nina and Treplev scene is repeated three times – this is not a duplication

of Treplev, but echoes, shadows, variations; and I am not Treplev there, at the end [when Butusov surges out of the paper 'walls', described above] but, rather, his alter ego and [as such] I, the creator, am inside what is created.

The point is that this is not a story about concrete people. We are speaking about the theme, which is bigger than the human being – the theme of love, which flows across the whole play. The themes of love, the theatre, creativity – these streams cross each other; they all flow into each other so that you stop understanding where love is, where the theatre is, where life, where death. This explains the form of the production – the form of ceaseless variations, so many variations, and from that comes our feeling of freedom – as well as happiness. The themes of love, theatre, and freedom unite [in the play as well as in the production]. Love is also creativity, love gives us freedom: the moment of loving is the moment of freedom, and in that moment you reach theatre. This is why the production is about freedom.

I remember a wonderful actor, Lyosha Devochenko, who, tragically, died young. He was very socially conscious and concerned with issues to do with social freedom and the freedom of humankind, and he spoke a great deal about them publicly. In an interview about which kind of theatre was necessary – was it political theatre, for instance? – he said that one of the most political theatre works he had ever seen was Butusov's *Seagull*. I was delighted, because we spoke in that production about human freedom, and freedom is also a political issue.

We had so many variations from which to choose, and we offered them to people so that they could choose – each person has the right to exist. And, here, the freedom of creativity was intertwined with life freedom, and this, in the longer term, influences politics. It becomes the meaning of human existence. We were going in this direction in the early 2010s, and we were not merely rebelling by destroying preconceived theatre ideas about age, typecasting, what kind of music [genre] it was appropriate to use, and so on. Our whole process was organic and flowed from the structure of the play. Chekhov is simply music, and when you

become entwined with this music, it allows you to move away from the framework of the writing of 'daily-lifeness'; you actually take this framework out of there altogether. The dramaturgy is poetry through and through. Chekhov – Shakespeare – this is pure music.

I staged *The Seagull* twice, the first time in Seoul (2008), and it was a completely different production. There was no music-music in it at all. It was on the relations between a mother and her son, which I was interested in at the time. It's a play that allows you to speak about anything – that's Chekhov. He doesn't have a nationality. He's cosmic. What kind of nationality does the moon have? Or the sun? Can it have a nationality?

Yours are reflections on the perennial question of 'What is Chekhov?' On the issue of Chekhov's music: I remember a magnificent, calm scene – gentle in its repetitive rhythm, gesture, and motions – with three women, two of them playing Masha, who laid mattresses on the floor to prepare beds. They unfold white sheets, stretch them out, and smooth them in a measured, ritualistic sort of manner, and speak in slightly sing-song voices – certainly not the speech of 'daily-lifeness', as you call it.

But it is not just about making a bed; it is a ritual of white sheets, a ritual also for Sorin, who is dying.

But white sheets are also for joyous ceremonies – weddings, baptisms. I see a link here with what I call your 'Bacchanalian' scene, where there are mounds and mounds of beautifully coloured fruit on a white cloth on a very large table. The actors are placed around this feast; the women in dresses with floral designs – I seem to remember white dresses with floral designs, a sense of whiteness – and loose long hair. They wear sumptuous garlands on their head; there is an enormous long box of flowers on the floor – red roses, as I remember. All of it, in its visual configuration, looks as if it alludes to, or at least can be associated with, Ancient Greece or Rome, and recalls as well, in some sort of subliminal way, pagan Russian ritual, the sacred ritual of spring – with an echo, perhaps, of Stravinsky's celebrated ballet [The Sacred Rite of Spring].

Yes, yes, or the meetings of the gods on Mount Olympus. You know, I wanted to free myself. There comes a time for directors when they are sick of themselves – I got so sick of myself – and you have to hear it, not miss the moment. You find yourself with keys with which you can open things, and you simply take the keys out of your pocket, and you begin to use them. You have to be vigilant [so as not to do this].

So this scene would have come out of the try-and-see rehearsal research that contours your directing. You, the director, want your actors to create together with you – to be what Stanislavsky, exasperated with dependent actors, called ‘co-creators’ and ‘co-authors’.

Absolutely.

Do practical problems arise for you, the director, from this integrated collaboration? Here you are, wanting all actors to contribute actively with their tries and tests. Yet there comes the moment when the director decides.

Of course, and that is what I do.

But aren't there times when there are contradictions and disagreements between you and the actors?

Yes, there are such times, but directors have the right to decide. If someone does not agree with this right, we can part company. It's very simple. Trust here is indispensable.

Agreed, but I ask because I have been thinking about the complexities of multiple authorship in our rapacious world. The moment of creative birthing is subtle, involving the input of many people, and you, the director, have the right to cut out this or that, risking, I presume, a disappointed sense of ownership and other unhappy feelings.

In this very moment there is no egoism. I give birth to this event. I am, if you like, its parent, and I become its midwife. This involves trust. It seems to me that there must be absolute honesty during the rehearsal process, and absolute equality in it. It is a very democratic process. Honesty in such a process may be

more optimistic than it is in reality but, when honesty is there, actors feel it. I can come to a rehearsal and quite honestly and openly say that I don't know what to do with this or that. I just don't know. I am not afraid to say it because there really are times when you really do *not* know.

Are you ever afraid to tell actors that you do not like this or that?

Well, I say it often. [Both laugh.] I can say, 'Stop, this isn't working out. It's rubbish.' But it's 'We are doing rubbish,' *not* 'You are doing it.' 'We, together, are doing it.' The 'we' is fundamental. I trust my actors, too. I ask them, 'What do you think about this?' 'How do you feel about it?' Actors are people who have to protect their feeling apparatus. They are like children in the best sense of this word. They cannot be messed up by 'everydayness', by 'reality'. Their feelings have to be limpid, uncontaminated. Feelings are what they work with. I can deal with more stuff piled on top of me and deal with more questions than they have to ask, but a director's brain can get muddled, and this is where actors help me. They are my helpers. I turn to them when I am confused, or get things wrong.

What you have been saying touches on an issue that has bothered me for some time, and it concerns the all-too pervasive idea, particularly among academics (I, after all, am an academic) that a director necessarily has a 'method' and you can script it and put it into something like a 'tool-box' to be a 'tool-kit' (the prevailing word for some years now in the English-speaking world) – a 'how-to' director's kit. My experience and study of directors indicate that the work of directors cannot be viewed and 'explained' in this mechanical, utilitarian, and sometimes even transactional fashion. Would you accept the word 'method' for yourself – that you have a clear-cut 'method'?

I would say that my method is the creation of a journey, that is, a construction over several months of a particular atmosphere and the immersion of the team that is going with me in this environment. [It involves] a particular tuning up of the actors' instruments,

establishing a rehearsal field that can yield results, and there must necessarily be some degree of openness so that they and I can discover new aspects, as well as the actors' new abilities, in ourselves, as professionals *and* human beings, rather than fall back on and exploit habitual skills and clichés. What kind of atmosphere this would be depends on the author, on the people in the rehearsal space – strange though that may seem.

I have, of course, my methodology with me on this journey, which I have been working out and developing over many, many years, but it is an individual methodology. This is why, when people speak of a certain universalization of the director's profession, their talk arouses doubt in me. Fundamental concepts and meanings of the profession certainly exist for me ('event', 'conflict', 'the actor's perception', and so on), but they belong to the stages of instruction. When you get up on your professional journey, you must leave that framework [and its limits].

Do you think directing can be set out in terms of steps and procedures?

No, definitely not, and it is very individual. Yes, of course, a whole body of experience and know-how exists on which directors can draw – areas that we must study – but if you don't work out your own way, it won't work. I am teaching my students this right now. You know, it's like the secret of cooking cherries that Firs talks about in *The Cherry Orchard*. This know-how [*sposob*] might well be what we understand by 'profession'. How do grandmothers cook cherries? They are professionals at doing it. They have their own, individual secret about how they make their preserves/jam [*vorennya*: 'preserves', where, in the cooking, the fruit remains whole; sometimes translated, less accurately, as 'jam']. Not one is like any other, although they use the same ingredients – cherries, sugar – but they are all different.

You cannot hide a secret in the theatre, nor should you. Only after colossal amounts of work can you – I wouldn't say discover it – merge with it. Only after this hard work, quantities of work, can you [as director] master it;

only when you have driven yourself into a terrible cul-de-sac as a result of massive quantities of work as you keep trying things out. It's like making sour cream [*smetana*], when you beat, beat, beat, beat the liquid cream until it becomes firm and supports itself. In the theatre *that* support is the profession. In the theatre it is the going through the beating of sour cream every day that sustains you. Beating sour cream every day can be excruciating, frightening, and very incomprehensible. [Laughs.]

Directing is very arduous work, and all the more so when the director moves from company to company rather than having a stable ensemble theatre that can be called 'home'. Your ensemble was the Lensoviet, where you developed numbers of actors. When was your first permanent appointment there?

Let me see, I think it must have been 1997, and I directed there for four or five years.

So this was the first Lensoviet period, but it was followed by a second period that started in 2011, with nothing actually staged there until Macbeth. Cinema a year later. Was it easier to work with a company of actors whom you had nurtured – your own group, let us say – than with a group schooled elsewhere, like, say, the Vakhtangov actors? You directed a stunning, structurally minimalist and also, I would say, visually streamlined Measure for Measure (2010) with the Vakhtangov company – your directorial debut there.

I ask if it was easier because you had said to me before, in one of our conversations six or seven years ago, how greatly you prize working with an ensemble company that is close to you. I mean 'ensemble theatre' in the deepest Stanislavskian sense of the phenomenon – people who share much the same outlook and values, who rely on mutual trust and faith in their work and who assume collective responsibility for it, and similar principles that bind artists together. Is it easier for a director who is integrally part of such a group rather than a 'visiting' director? When you returned to the Lensoviet, was it to your 'own' people, or, at least, did you have the prospect of shaping people to become your 'own'?



Figure 7. *Macbeth. Cinema*. The Lensoviet Theatre, St Petersburg. Laura Pitshelauri. Photograph: Yuliya Smelkina. Copyright courtesy of Yuliya Smelkina.

I took one year to make *Macbeth. Cinema*, my first production here. One year was also indispensable for becoming familiar with the company and understanding what was happening in this theatre. I took out several productions that I believed did not correspond to the high artistic level, the high professional level, required for a significant theatre. In the course of that year, I did a big casting for a sizeable intake and selected a group of people who were subsequently part of *Macbeth. Cinema* (Figure 7).

It seems to me that the word ‘easier’ is not altogether precise because, on the one hand, it is easier to work with people whom you know, but, on the other, it creates more responsibility. You have to be attentive to their growth so that they do not just use what they already know. The bond that arises within an ensemble is an essential one. It

transforms, simply, theatre into a space of relations and communion [*obshcheniye*] on another level of existence, and this becomes the meaning of life. I am on the side of such a theatre and its attitude to work. All theatre is work, of course, but this work is work that becomes a service – please forgive my zealous word – and I like this for, then, my life is needed; and people respond to this and come. All my director friends, whom I respect, battle precisely for this very same thing. This shows that not all directors have been educated to giving precedence to money.

‘Ensembleness’ has been destroyed – only fragments of it remain where it still survives. Not very good things have been happening to Stanislavsky’s legacy, which is tied up with his system of education and development (*vospitaniye*) and ethics. Stanislavsky wrote a separate essay on the subject – ‘Ethics’ – and that’s what it is called. We begin teaching our actors from this essay. He believed in the primacy of art and gave priority to the idea of art in his practice. If this is not a priority – and it is not when a managing director or administrator rule the theatre – then it means that the artistic idea is not operating. What operates are financial ideas, or some kind of ideological idea. Which is why to say that we are continuing Stanislavsky’s work is a lie because Stanislavsky’s most important work was founding an art theatre, an artistic field, in which the artistic idea predominates.

You left the Lensoviet in 2018. It seemed to me from the several Lensoviet productions that I have seen of this period – The Three Sisters (2014), Uncle Vanya (2017) (Figure 8), and, of course, Macbeth. Cinema – that this was a youthful theatre; it was a young theatre for the young. Is that so?

Yes, that is how I conceived it. I wanted my theatre to become a place of support for new, young people, for intellectual people, people with good taste, people for whom theatre was a place of reflection and artistic development. I always wanted my theatre to be interesting, catching, and emotionally attractive.

I did not want a theatre that followed the demands of the public. I did not want to make



Figure 8. *Uncle Vanya*. The Lensoviet Theatre, St Petersburg. Aleksandr Novikov as Vanya. Photograph: Yuliya Smelkina. Copyright courtesy of Yuliya Smelkina.

entertainment for entertainment's sake or for the sake of entertaining people who would bring in money. In short, I did not want to make commercial theatre where it is more important to have tactics for making money than be concerned with artistic creativity and a corresponding repertoire, and where a star system replaces the mutual attentiveness of ensemble relations. A theatre like that does not interest me.

I was also very taken by the fact that your audiences were young, very many in their teens. This is rather rare. In London, for instance, theatre audiences are usually from the ageing population, many quite old; young people are generally few in the established venues, although their attendance there may vary according to the production shown.

Unfortunately, I agree with you about age attendance. I have noticed it in France, too. If people go to the theatre at a young age and fall

in love with it, they will go to it and love it all their lives; and, even if a theatre audience is small by comparison with film, it is not a random one, nor should it be random. We used the word 'service' before and, although I do not particularly like this comparison, the young audiences we are talking about are like parishioners [forming a community]: they go to the theatre at the very least two or three times a month – not once every three months. They are happy, wonderful people; they are vaccinated against harm. Directors do not really raise issues about educating and developing audiences; it happens by itself because, one way or another, we speak in our work about life matters. We try to do something honest. Whether we manage it is another question, but I have never met a great director who propagates negativity.

There was a period in my life when I realized that few people went to the theatre: it must have been 1990, 1991, and 1992, when the country was in shock, and the theatre was

looking for new paths. [These were the years around the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.] There was a kind of theatre hole, and all this was happening while I was studying. And then everything suddenly found its place, where, in Russia, theatre is always in the orbit of ideology, which is why the powers-that-be consider the theatre to be an ideological instrument.

Now we have a completely paradoxical situation. The country is once again experiencing shock, but the theatres are packed to the rafters. It could simply be that people are looking for emotional release. People come together in the theatre and feel better in such circumstances. This subject is probably for a conversation requiring specific research.

I am a little taken aback. Why? Because, in my many years of travel to Moscow and St Petersburg for my theatre research, attending the Golden Mask Festival as part of that research, I noticed that the directors and their works were not what I would call 'ideological'. They would take a critical view of the seats of power in the country: it sufficed to grasp the nuances of what they were doing to see the political streak in the work. A few – I am thinking of one, in particular – were, I would say, crudely political and crudely ideological. But what I have seen in the twenty years and more before Covid, and during one Covid year of the Golden Mask online [NTQ 148], was evidence of research into new attitudes, new forms, new theatrical means of working, new writing, and new ways of organizing spaces of performance and how to perform in them; also how to welcome spectators in them differently and, as well, how actually to run new spaces, including wonderfully renovated and new buildings. You and your work are very much part of this dynamic. Even the comparatively staid Moscow Art Theatre was open to super-daring and, even, grippingly outlandish performances.

So, forgive me, I don't really understand which theatres you mean. The Satirikon never struck me as being particularly ideological, one way or another. Nor was the Vakhtangov. The Pushkin Theatre occasionally was: and the two marvellous Brechts that you staged there were, after all, Brecht! There were The Good Person of Szechwan (2013) and Drums in the Night (2016)

(Figures 9 and 10). A third, Cabaret Brecht (the only one of the three that I have not seen live – only digitally), was made at the Lensoviet (2014). It seemed to me, during these years, that here was a country in which time, money, and enormous artistic commitment were channelled into theatre research and innovation in the living theatre.

Yes, this is right! But I should clarify that, when I say 'ideological', I do not mean 'political'. What I mean is that the theatre in Russia, starting from the wandering-minstrel clowns [skomorokhi], Gogol's plays, Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit*, and Saltykov-Shchedrin, is a breeding ground for free-thinking. The theatre puts questions and discussions concerning morality and ethics to the test. In Russia, these questions are in the sphere of ideology. In Russia, your ethics are an ideological question. That is why I call theatre productions 'ideological'.

Concerning the Satirikon, I realize that you do not know my production *R* (2022), which I staged there. I did not make political theatre in the sense in which you describe your example ['crudely political'] but, nevertheless, it was there: I talk [in my work] about such matters as freedom. *R* was initially based on Gogol's *Revizor* (*The Government Inspector*). However, at a certain point, we began to move directly away from Gogol's plot as our own texts, our own monologues, began to emerge; and I realized that we were so aware and so worried about what was happening in our country that our discussions were more interesting than the play. At that moment, I saw the way to the production. It just happened like this, and I felt that what was coming out of us was more important.

So we called in the playwright Misha Durnenkov, who rehearsed with us and wrote down our monologues. It was a complex and protracted process whose result was the play-text of the production that came out one month before the war [that is, the escalation on 24 February 2022 of the Russo-Ukrainian war]. The production was premiered in January 2022. In essence, the production expresses our apocalyptic take on what was currently happening [and this was] one month before the apocalyptic happened. We speak in the production of the state as an annihilation



Figure 9. *Drums in the Night*. Pushkin Theatre, Moscow. Photograph: Galina Fesenko. Copyright courtesy of Galina Fesenko.



Figure 10. *Drums in the Night*. Pushkin Theatre, Moscow. Photograph: Galina Fesenko. Copyright courtesy of Galina Fesenko.

machine; we speak of dictatorship, of the destruction of civil society; and we speak of the Gulag as the country's principle of construction (Figures 11 and 12).

Inevitably, it was at the Satirikon, where I had begun with Ionesco's *Macbeth*, and, as we discussed earlier, where lyricism mattered to me: I needed a lyrical intonation. Even so, *Macbeth*'s last monologue, when he seizes power and becomes a tyrant, said everything. Already then, in that play, were the questions of what tyranny was and where the world was going.

You have some of this [destruction of civil society] in Macbeth. Cinema, although differently, don't you?

Macbeth. Cinema wasn't about power but about how we were becoming slaves of the surface world; how we lose ourselves; how we stop being people; how we become shadows of films, of multimedia; how we don't have a life but play roles as if we were making a serial in which we construct our lives, or are the heroes of some sort of film. From here comes the word 'cinema'. I caught myself out like this when I walking along a street and looked at myself from outside, as if I were participating in a film. The production was born from this sensation. It was my sensation of things, but I think it was applicable to others, especially at that time. Everything is totally different today: we have received a huge blow to our heads and hearts; and I think that everything that has happened has happened because we were all in a kind of euphoria then. The war has destroyed it – this euphoria and our captivation with ourselves.

Did you have a premonition that there would be a war as you worked on R? Or was it a terrible shock?

I couldn't believe it, nobody could. Nobody wanted to believe that it could happen. We discussed it, but nobody wanted it to happen. There were scenes in the production . . . One was: 'How much can we endure before they send our children to war?' This was Misha's text. But it was not just a

matter of leaving *Revizor* and going across to our text. It is important to understand that there are very fine links between them; and the characters have the names of Gogol's characters.

The fact that *R* received a Golden Mask for best production in the drama category – without any mention of my name – shows how there are still people who try to indicate their position in some way. Their decision was quite bold, given that the 2022 competition was fierce. There was, for instance, Rimas Tuminas's wonderful *War and Peace*, which received the Jury's Special Prize. Clearly, you couldn't compare works, so it was very difficult, but it wasn't boxing that won. The fact that the production won that prize speaks of the merit of the people who worked on the 2022 Golden Mask.¹

Even so, the organization had decided that, this year, the Golden Mask would not single out directors and playwrights for awards and so these categories would not exist. It was, of course, a silly ruse to cover up the fact that you could not pronounce the name of a person who did not support the war.

May I ask you – this is an intimate question, close to the bone – why you decided to leave Russia?

I cannot agree with the fact that my homeland can be aggressive, can be preoccupied with denigrating people and killing innocent people. I cannot agree with that. It splits my head open and makes me ill. This is my personal protest, and it is obvious that I cannot change anything. [Long, thoughtful silence.] I don't want my son to go to war. It is impossible for me to accept such a thing. It is impossible. Members of my family died, fighting during the Second World War against fascism. No, I cannot accept it.

Thank you for your frankness, and please forgive me for putting the question so bluntly to you, but I have been thinking about it a great deal because . . . Let me put it like this. You live for the theatre, as only a great director can who wishes it to be clear and clean, to be art and not a commercial bauble, so that people can find something significant in it for them. For a person and director like you, walking away from a culture where it was possible for you



Figure 11. *R.* The Satirikon Theatre, Moscow. Timofey Tribuntsev. Photograph: Aleksandre Ivanishkin. Copyright courtesy of Aleksandr Ivanishkin.



Figure 12. *R.* The Satirikon Theatre, Moscow. Photograph: Aleksandre Ivanishkin. Copyright courtesy of Aleksandr Ivanishkin.

to work as you have worked and say what you have said [in and through the theatre] seems to me utterly terrifying.

Yes, it is terrifying. We live from day to day. But let me add that it is no more terrifying than what people [in the war zone] are experiencing today.

You said to me on the telephone recently that you had gathered a group of students at GITIS [the State Institute of Theatre Art, renamed the Russian Institute of Theatre Arts after the demise of the Soviet Union] to teach directing.² Was this during Covid in 2020? Are you continuing your work with these students now that you are abroad?

Yes, I have a great sense of responsibility for them, and I hope to complete my course with them. My goal is to complete it. Their third year of study [of four] is coming to a close right now. It is a very good course, and they are very talented people; among them are people of great promise to the profession. However much they [GITIS] give me to teach – I will be answerable for it. I say ‘however much they give me’ because anything could happen in respect of my position and departure.

You and your work, as I know it, indicate how much you are a person-to-person director and teacher, and how you have helped to nurture your collaborators’ sense of togetherness. Zoom is not body-to-body, so how does your practice square with a digital system?

It works! It works, first of all, because I have my colleagues who help, and I believe that, in the situation that is taking shape, we simply have to believe in it. Second, I have accumulated considerable experience over the years, and I can see that it works. There is no doubt that it is extremely complex: you have to pierce through the screen psycho-physically, so to say, but if you grasp that this is absolutely essential and that you have nothing else but Zoom, then it *can* work. The usual, most obvious thought is that it cannot. Yet, if you put your strength behind it, it *does* work: I can

see how the students change, how they grow, how they feel what they are doing.

We have to accept the situation and not pretend that everything is OK, because nothing is OK! When I consider that we are pushing our way through a nightmare, a new kind of energy comes out of me, which combines with the additional sense of responsibility experienced by all of the participants in our work.

Are you able to do everything you would normally have done? Are you all able to work on your feet?

Well, of course! How else could I work?! I occasionally discuss texts and break them down with the directors of the group, but the actors work *only* on their feet.

What I need to ask you, then, is: Can you actually see the whole thing on the screen – a whole bunch of people working like that?

Of course I can see everything. Contemporary technical means are there [at our disposal]. Everything continues as before. Practice goes on for eight to ten hours, as before, and I am here, observing; and I assess and discuss, also with my pedagogue colleagues, what was being done. If anything, concentration and intensive attention are indispensable even more than when you are beside the people doing it.

Well, I am glad I asked you this question because my limited experience of practice done on Zoom, and not only by Master’s level students but also by recognized professionals, shows them locked in boxes, generally forming larger boxes.

It is not a replacement at one hundred per cent! It is impossible to replace tactile contact by these means, but we have to accept the gap created here. The lack of ‘completeness’ of these means should not be destructive. We are faced with an entirely new type of human communion [*obshcheniye*], and we need to appropriate it to our advantage.

I am discovering certain pluses. I have to formulate my thoughts better and take more

care and be precise. I have to be more correct [in my behaviour]. Something is changing in me too. Of course, I become more tired. You collect some energy from people who work near you, but here you cannot. Which is why I become more physically tired than when I am with them in person.

Yes, you are discussing one aspect of our present world in which war and ferocious capitalism loom large and where creating theatre, like studying in schools and universities, takes place in extremely challenging circumstances at all levels – financial, social, ethical, and cultural; just these words to start with.

My last question, then, is the most difficult, and it is double-barrelled: What kind of theatre do you think can be done today, and what might it be, not for all eternity but for the next two or three years?

I am trying to find an answer to this very question myself! Without any doubt, it is an extremely difficult one. We cannot pretend that nothing is happening around us, but, by the same token, we cannot forget that the theatre is an artistic space. Theatre productions cannot possibly not take into account, in some way, what is happening in the world. And we don't know what will happen in two years' time. There can only be a long answer to your question, I'm afraid.

Let me give you a fuller answer to the question that you raised earlier about why I left Russia: *Cabaret Brecht* (Figure 13). I left because I asked myself how I could stay, when I had made such a strong anti-war production as this? My leaving underscores what I was doing in it, and I am proud of this production because everything [concerning war] was developing then [Russia had annexed Crimea in February 2014], and it *does* make a hugely anti-war statement. I can give you an account of an event that happened during a performance. The actor who played Brecht (Sergey Volkov) was giving a monologue, in which were these words:

'I am not even Bertolt Brecht. I am simply a young actor who finds himself to be of the age for military call-up in such times when the leaders of the state, whom I have never seen with my own eyes ever in my life, are

preparing a war with my participation. If you think that your images have been so successful that I would follow you to foreign countries, holding a weapon in my hands, then I have this to say to you: I would rather be a refugee than a real man.'

At this very moment a woman's indignant shout resounded from the auditorium: 'You should be shot!' It is hard even to imagine that anyone could react like that to a theatre text. This was in 2015. You can imagine just how white-hot the situation was – already, at that time.

Cabaret Brecht [premiered in St Petersburg in September 2014] was one of the reasons why I was obliged to leave the Lensoviet Theatre. They did not forgive me for it. They could not close it down at the time because there was no censorship, but they could not forgive me. They kept asking me why I was doing such things; they demanded that I remove certain parts of the text. Then the production was not programmed in the season at some point after I had left the Lensoviet Theatre, because four or five young company actors who had performed in the production left within a year of my departure.

Yura, apologies for interrupting, but who are 'they'? The theatre administrators?

'They' are also St Petersburg's Department of Culture. It was the theatre management at first, but when my struggle began over the artistic direction of the theatre and I asserted what I considered to be necessary for the theatre's growth, the Department of Culture became involved, asking me why I didn't make happy productions to entertain people. The conflict fell to this level – the conflict was cumulative – and, when I went into open conflict with them, they reminded me of the argument over *Cabaret Brecht*.

As I said before, I hate war. The aggression that had been developing in society was emotional, psychological war, breeding intolerance, and I did not want us to go in the direction of aggression, which can only lead to another Berlin Wall. I was working on Brecht in order to say, 'Don't go in the direction of aggression, don't go in the direction of the Berlin Wall,' which was a monstrous crime



Figure 13. *Cabaret Brecht*. The Lensoviet Theatre, St Petersburg. Photograph: Yuliya Smelkina. Copyright courtesy of Yuliya Smelkina. The placard reads 'War is Madness'.

against people. My *Drums in the Night* was about that. I used a short, two-minute or so film-clip from a documentary in it, showing how the wall was being built, and how people were throwing themselves out of windows because they were being cut off from family – from those close to them. This is not the tragedy of 'Germans': it is the tragedy of people. I was saying, 'Please, look. Don't go there!'

I left the Lensoviet Theatre because the conflict between two different worldviews was intolerable. I am not a revolutionary. I cannot fight in the literal sense of the word with a gun. I can only say.

Thank you, Yura, very much, from the bottom of my heart, for your generous time and openness in such tremendously difficult circumstances.

Editorial Note

My deepest thanks are extended to Maria Nikolayeva for her immense and kindest

assistance in procuring the requested photographs and permissions for me, and also for following up several important attendant details, thus adding to her already considerable burden and making mine so much lighter.

The rhythm and flow of this Conversation did not allow interruptions to introduce *Flight*, which, staged in 2015, appeared in the thick of Butusov's great difficulties over *Cabaret Brecht*. The 1927 play by Mikhaïl Bulgakov is set in the Crimean Isthmus towards the end of the Russian Civil War (1917–1922). Here the remnants of the White Army attempt to battle against the imminently victorious Red Army – a theme of war and its devastating might, which allows a spectator like myself to see Butusov's *Flight* as flanked, on the one side, by the 2014 *Cabaret Brecht* and, on the other, by the 2016 *Drums in the Night*.

However, thematic affinity aside, Butusov's *Flight* is not blatantly about war as such but about its impact: people on the run, people



Figure 14. *Flight*. The Vakhtangov Theatre, Moscow. Viktor Dobronravov. Photograph: Olga Kuzyakina. Copyright courtesy of Olga Kuzyakina.



Figure 15. *Flight*. The Vakhtangov Theatre, Moscow. Photograph: Olga Kuzyakina. Copyright courtesy of Olga Kuzyakina.

trapped, people dehumanized, whether civilian or military, and thus people reduced to the lowest possible level of existence. Butusov's shattering image for this degraded humanity is a cockroach, performed by the unbelievably observant and versatile Vakhtangov actor Viktor Dobronravov [Gloucester in Butusov's *King Lear*] with the minutiae of his deft fingers, his body shrunk to the lowest possible size for a squatting actor, and his twitching face that of an outsize insect. Yet this face has vestiges of the face that the actor gives to White Army General Khludov, when the latter juggles four telephones to issue commands (Figure 14).

It is like a ghastly-comical hallucination. And it alludes to the cockroach races in which the fundamentally bloodthirsty and brutalized Khludov participates with fellow General Charnota. As in Bulgakov, Butusov interlinks the fate of these two men with that of two civilians who are also on the run: Serafima Korzukhina, abandoned by her husband in appalling conditions, who is disintegrating from trauma; and Sergey Golubkov, a university professor, who attempts to protect her – an absurd man, for all his goodness, and a man out of touch and out of place. Perhaps he is a Butusov Fool; perhaps a glimmer of hope in the human darkness; perhaps that 'light' to which Butusov refers during the *Conversation*, saying that he needs some light by the end of his productions. Butusov states in this *Conversation* that atmosphere is one of his vital theatre principles, and this production is all atmosphere, mostly in a penumbra, with multiple shades of atmosphere

diffused through horror, the comic-grotesque, stylized-satire, absurdity, Expressionist-style exaggeration, strait-laced clowning, and, not least, loud music played live on the stage. Did I hear Pink Floyd? His is, as Butusov observes in the preceding pages, a theatre of playing and not psychological theatre (Figure 15).

Further details of Butusov's work, in the context of the Golden Mask selections, may be found in the following volumes of *New Theatre Quarterly*: XXXI, No. 3 [NTQ 123] (August 2015); XXXIII, No. 3 [NTQ 131] (August 2017); XXXV, No. 3 [NTQ 139] (August 2019); and XXXVII, No. 4 [NTQ 148] (November 2021). For Butusov's *Measure for Measure*, at the Gyula International Shakespeare Festival in Hungary, see *New Theatre Quarterly*, XXIX, No. 4 [NTQ 116] (November 2013).

Notes and References

1. The jury of the Golden Mask National Theatre Award and Festival (to give it its formal name) changes every year, and its members are requested to travel across the whole of Russia, each to assigned geographical areas, to seek worthy contestants for the respective prizes awarded in different categories. The latter include, apart from dramatic theatre, contemporary dance, ballet, opera, operetta, musical theatre, puppet theatre, and several more. And they include as well artistic makers – actors, directors, playwrights, scenographers, light designers, composers, and more for the respective categories (thus conductors, for example). The Golden Mask is a gigantic enterprise, requiring unstinting dedication from its founders and collaborators. It was founded by the Russian Union of Theatre in 1993.
2. In recent years, the old name GITIS (which nevertheless continued to be commonly used) and the new one have formally appeared together, hyphenated.