



**Russian Theatre in the Age of High Putinism:
Politics and Aesthetics**

Alexander James Thomas

University College

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Short Abstract..... | 3 |
| Long Abstract..... | 4 |
| Prologue..... | 11 |
| Introduction..... | 14 |
| Capitalist Realism: The New Model of State Cultural Policy..... | 23 |
| Policy in Practice: ‘Театральное дело’..... | 43 |
| Summary..... | 46 |
| 1) Post-Zero: Documentary Theatre after <i>Час восемнадцать</i> | 49 |
| How Teatr.doc Became ‘Political’..... | 56 |
| <i>Война близко</i> | 70 |
| <i>Пытки</i> | 76 |
| <i>Олюб</i> | 88 |
| Teatr.doc’s ‘Torture Trilogy’..... | 95 |
| 2) Document-Based Performance: ‘New Documentarism’..... | 109 |
| <i>Конституция</i> | 112 |
| <i>YouTube/В полиции</i> | 126 |
| <i>Locker room talk</i> | 140 |
| 3) Body Politics: ‘Новая драма’ in High Putinism..... | 156 |
| <i>Человек из Подольска</i> | 161 |
| <i>Философы, или Великая оргия</i> | 177 |
| <i>28 дней</i> | 191 |
| 4) Actionist Theatre: The Burden of Gruz 300..... | 208 |
| <i>Груз 300</i> | 216 |
| <i>Рейв № 228</i> | 238 |
| <i>Россия 20:20</i> | 260 |
| Conclusion..... | 276 |
| Bibliography..... | 283 |

Short Abstract

Setting out from the premise that legislation is performative, this study initially explores the relationship between state cultural policy, censorship, and theatre production. The case is made that following the so-called ‘conservative-authoritarian turn’ in Russia in 2012, there has been a gradual return to an interventionist cultural policy qualitatively similar in some respects to that of Soviet-era Socialist Realism. I identify and describe the period in question – which is characterised by intensified censorship in its numerous guises, a new highly prescriptive cultural policy, and arbitrary repressions of nonconformist elements in society – as the period of High Putinism.

Having established the environment in which contemporary theatre in Russia operated during the second decade of the twenty-first century, surveys of the field are combined with close analysis of a dozen productions from the period. Collectively, these works all demonstrate in various ways what Jacques Rancière calls ‘dissensus’, which is to say they resist, circumvent, and transgress the norms of the ideological consensus set out by the state cultural policy. What they develop instead are alternative ways of thinking, seeing and doing that look beyond the horizons of the status quo. They achieve this through a variety of means, including aesthetic experimentation, audience participation, digital technology, contemporary dance and music, as well as radical postdramatic staging devices – in short, a hybridisation of genres, styles, disciplines, and media. The resulting thesis is a cross-section of a vivid contemporary theatre scene existing largely on the margins of cultural life. From this position of marginality, a diverse set of emancipatory performance practices emerges.

Long Abstract

In ‘Russian Theatre in the Age of High Putinism: Politics and Aesthetics’, I set out to interrogate Russian drama and text-based theatre in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Initially keen to explore the normative nature of dramatic realism, my thesis developed a more fundamental shift of focus away from dramatic text altogether. The resulting work is a combination of updates on the situation in text-based theatre on the one hand, and explorations of text-decentred performance theatre on the other hand. The latter represents a small but significant trend in contemporary Russian theatre, and is an underrepresented field of research.

One of the biggest problems that I came up against was finding ways to write about performance where no text or recording was available. The challenges that this presented were firstly approached by turning to general theatre theory and contemporary performance criticism, and secondly by finding and creating alternative primary sources (such as by taking interviews with the creators of the works in question, and collating online reviews with audience responses on social media). My aim was to investigate what it is that theatre performances do, and to what extent they are reflections of and responses to the world around them. The questions that run through this thesis are: how do politics and aesthetics interact in contemporary Russian theatre, and what is the result of that interaction, where it occurs?

As a way in to approaching these questions, I initially set about analysing the legislative changes that have taken place over the past decade, and particularly since 2012, when, as various scholars have noted, something of a ‘conservative-authoritarian turn’ took place. The purpose of this was to establish the context in which theatre production existed over the course of the decade, so that the interaction

of politics and aesthetics would be more visible. My conclusions from this initial investigation were that there was a gradual intensification of censorship – in numerous guises – from 2012 onwards, which combined with an increase in political repressions to create a hostile environment for nonconformist theatre making. This resulted in a situation where a number of theatre makers and managers feared for their safety and freedom. These are not inconsequential factors when considering the specific works of theatre themselves, and the locations of their occurrence. Restrictive legislation designed to curtail so-called ‘non-normative’ or ‘non-traditional’ views and behaviour – in favour of unquestioning support for the state and its policies – has resulted in the unavoidable impression that some of the basic tenets of the Soviet-era artistic policy ‘Socialist Realism’ have been reinstated, in a new hybrid form. Given that Russia is now a globally-integrated capitalist country – albeit in a form that is still dominated by the state – I have called the new state cultural policy ‘Capitalist Realism’, which both establishes the historical link to Socialist Realism, whilst also drawing a line between them, as separate but related systems. Furthermore, to distinguish my usage of the term from the general Western political theory of ‘capitalist realism’ popularised by British critic Mark Fisher, the new Russian state cultural policy Capitalist Realism is capitalised (following the convention of Socialist Realism), whereas the political theory ‘capitalist realism’ is placed in inverted commas and is uncapitalised.

Throughout the thesis, the post-2012 era is described as the period of High Putinism, to distinguish it from the more liberal politics of Putin’s first two terms as president (2000-08). I considered this a necessary distinction not only for practical reasons, but also for reasons that relate to the history of theatre in the twenty-first century. The first decade of the so-called ‘Новая драма’ movement was a period of

unprecedented prosperity, growth, freedom, and financial investment in the cultural sphere, which culminated in the major investment programmes of Dmitrii Medvedev's presidency (2008-12), dubbed a 'golden age' for Russian theatre by one critic. From the vantage point of 2020, the contrast between the two periods is more apparent. The sharp turn away from investment in contemporary art and culture – and the persecution of those recipients who did not accept political loyalty as a condition for receiving state funds – is a completely different cultural environment to that of pre-2012. The era of High Putinism is therefore characterised by the exacerbation and intensification of the restrictive, intolerant tendencies that were occasionally glimpsed in the early Putin years, but have since manifested themselves to a greater degree, reflected in both domestic and foreign policy. Due to the anthropological nature of documentary theatre, which takes its source material from social reality, it has a tendency to address socially and politically relevant themes more than other forms of theatre do. This makes it a useful bellwether for the times, and as such it is a logical starting point for my exploration of the interaction of politics and aesthetics in Russian theatre in the 2010s. The majority of Western scholarship on twenty-first century Russian theatre has understandably focused on the two major and interrelated developments to have emerged in that time – 'Новая драма', and documentary theatre. Addressing the existing scholarship, my first chapter provides an update on the situation in documentary theatre nearly one decade after the conservative-reactionary turn that led to a new era in the history of the antagonistic relationship between the state and the theatre in Russia.

In dedicating half of my thesis to an analysis of performance practices where no playscript is present, I have attempted to redress a current gap in the field. The focus on drama and text-based theatre in existing scholarship is logical and justified,

but I considered that there was a need to look beyond these forms to some of the experimental, hybrid forms of text-decentred and participatory performance that have been taking place in recent years. The originality of the thesis lies in this attempt to shift the field on to new ground. For reasons that are possibly due to the ephemerality of these kinds of performances and the lack of text or video recording of the event, these works go overlooked more often than not. I hope that my documentation of a few of these occurrences can serve as a partial corrective to the existing deficit in the literature. Over the course of the thesis, I introduce a number of terms that are unfamiliar to the field of Russian theatre studies: new documentarism; Actionist theatre; High Putinism; Capitalist Realism. These phenomena are explored in detail and given due consideration for their novelty and contribution to our evolving understanding of contemporary Russian theatre as it continues to develop in the twenty-first century. Additionally, my chapters on documentary theatre and ‘Новая драма’ respectively offer significant updates on the situation for text-based theatre at the end of the second decade of the century.

From four major research trips over a three-year period (2017-19), it became clear to me that the contemporary theatre scene had changed since the heyday of ‘Новая драма’. Some of the reasons for this are mentioned above, but nonetheless I have tried in my writing to capture something of the vitality of the scene that I experienced during those years. I was keen to avoid the well-known names of the ‘Новая драма’ movement, many of whom have by now become established mainstays on the stages of state theatres throughout the country. Instead, I sought out the innovations and evolutions that have taken place since the well-known breakthroughs of the first decade of the ‘Новая драма’ movement. These occurred not on the main stages of the big, well-funded state theatres, but rather on the margins

of the theatre scene, largely unnoticed or ignored by critics. That said, however, whilst marginality is a significant aspect of many of the works that feature in the thesis, it is also true that the horizons of my research did not extend much further than Moscow. In spite of my intentions to give due consideration to regional theatre as well, it proved beyond the scope of this thesis. All of my research trips combined were not exhaustive of the capital's theatre scene, and for this reason it was difficult to get beyond it. It is the case that a number of annual theatre festivals held in the capital bring the best of regional theatre to the city, meaning that a certain degree of knowledge of the theatrical landscape of the country as a whole can be gleaned from being based for extended periods of time in Moscow alone. This is evidenced by the fact that many of the plays and playwrights mentioned in the thesis hail from diverse cities across Russia. It is also the case that the 'Новая драма' movement was founded in Moscow, and the city has continued to be its spiritual home, centred around the annual Liubimovka Festival of Young Dramaturgy, and its host venue Teatr.doc. Thus, whilst Moscow would inevitably feature prominently in any study of contemporary Russian theatre, I nonetheless perceive it as a weakness in my argument that I have little firsthand experience of theatre beyond the capital to support my conclusions.

On a general level, my close readings of a dozen works of theatre from recent years have once again demonstrated the age-old ability of art to detect and depict changes in society ahead of time. Art's ability if not to see the future then to see the present moment before it has become visible in other spheres makes it worthwhile engaging in detailed study of cultural production as it takes place in the present day, as well as from the recent past. It became clear to me that nonconformist contemporary theatre makers in Russia were engaging with the political ideology of

the state in ways both subtle and overt, developing forms of discursive resistance to its hegemonic norms and processes. In my attempts to understand how these works achieved this, something approaching a coherent set of emancipatory performance practices emerged.

In giving overdue critical attention to a number of disparate works of text-decentred performance theatre, it is hoped that this will be a starting point for broadening the field beyond the traditional logocentrism of theatre criticism. With a background more in literature than theatre, I say this out of a conviction that the value of contemporary theatre lies not only in what it has in common with literature, but also in what it alone can do that other art forms cannot. In an age of the mediatisation and virtualisation of public and private life, theatre's unique ability to engage spectators with others plays an important role in facilitating unmediated interpersonal exchange. Theatre can create meaningful interactions between strangers, provisionally building community through performance in the otherwise atomising worlds of virtual reality, social media, and – most recently – the global pandemic. At the time of writing in late 2020, it is impossible to avoid the events of the past year, which have brought about huge changes in the ways that we interact with each other. Whilst the lasting consequences of these changes are not yet known, new habits and advances in technology make it unlikely that there will be a return to the old norms. The huge increase in online communication and social isolation caused by the global pandemic has brought short-term challenges and long-term opportunities for theatre, once it becomes possible to gather and interact in person again (to say nothing of the possibilities for digital theatre, which has flourished under 'lockdown' conditions). Participatory forms of theatre will have a unique role to play in bringing people back together, to explore collective trauma and navigate ways through the common

concerns of the future. This thesis shows that contemporary Russian theatre has the potential to take up that mantle, embracing the needs of the day as it has done throughout the century thus far.

Prologue

On 31 May 2019, a young man stood in Red Square, the heart of the Russian capital and in plain view of the seat of state power, the Kremlin. He held in his hands a small placard with three words on it: ‘Против системы Станиславского’. His protest lasted for seven minutes, before he was arrested and taken to Kitai-gorod police station, along with the camerawoman who had been filming him. What the police who arrested him did not know was that this action was being livestreamed to an audience sitting in the Teatr na Taganke a couple of kilometres away, as part of an experimental theatre performance taking place there. The proceedings were captured on video, and later that day the story was picked up and reported on by a variety of media platforms.¹ Whilst the incident itself is perhaps amusing, reflecting the absurdity of the law enforcement agencies in their zero-tolerance approach towards public protest, even when the cause is as esoteric as opposition to Stanislavskii’s system of theatre, the consequences were less so – the managing director of the Teatr na Taganke cancelled the remainder of the project, expelled the organisers and all the participants from the building, and demanded a public apology from the organisers for the incident. They refused, instead publicly declaring their support for the arrested theatre makers and for the artistic merit of their work.² The irony of this incident

¹ There were at least eighteen different news reports on the incident. See, for example, ‘Na Krasnoi ploschadi zaderzhali rukovoditelia “Teatra na vynos” s plakatom “Protiv sistemy Stanislavskogo”’, *Novaia gazeta*, 31 May 2019 <<https://novayagazeta.ru/news/2019/05/31/152146-na-krasnoy-ploschadi-zaderzhali-rukovoditelya-teatra-na-vynos-s-plakatom-protiv-sistemy-stanislavskogo>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

² The action was called ‘Тридцать первая’, by Aleksei Ershov and Veronika Nikul’shina, and was a part of the project ‘Смещение’, curated by Viktor Vilisov. The managing director of the Teatr na Taganke is Irina Apeksimova. Vilisov’s comments can be found on his Telegram channel @apollonia, 1 June 2020, as well as in an article by Ul’iana Bondarenko, ‘Dovol’no unylyi teatr: V chem smysl spektaklia s zaderzhaniem na Krasnoi ploschadi’, *The*

taking place during Russia's so-called 'Год театра' was not lost on some commentators, exemplifying the atmosphere of cultural intolerance and increasing censorship at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century.³ How theatre in Russia arrived at this point of radical artistic experimentation brushing up against official reactionary conservatism – and the antagonistic relationship between these two forces – is the subject of this study.

It is fair to assume that the police did not arrest the young man in Red Square on account of his opposition to Stanislavskii. They arrested him for the act of carrying out an action that drew attention to itself adjacent to the Kremlin, ostensibly on the charge of conducting an unsanctioned protest, even though technically speaking one-person pickets do not require pre-approval with the authorities. However, the full irony of the proceedings was only appreciated by those sitting in the audience inside the Teatr na Taganke at the time – being arrested by the police for publicly declaring opposition to the hegemony of the Stanislavskiiian system in Russian theatre seemed perfectly to demonstrate the extent of the problem faced by contemporary theatre makers in their battle for legitimacy against the intransigence of the theatrical establishment. After the participants in the project were unceremoniously escorted from the theatre premises along with their belongings, the antagonistic nature of this relationship between the traditional and the contemporary was on full display. The message was clear – there is no place for free experimentation in state-funded theatres.

Village, 2 June 2019 <<https://www.the-village.ru/city/react/352175-teatr-na-taganke>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

³ The 'Год театра' was critiqued, for example, by three cartoons on the contemporary theatre-dedicated Telegram channel @NemirovichandDanchenko (14 March 2019), one of which depicted the masks of the Golden Mask award behind prison bars and surrounded by a wreath of barbed wire.

The choice of venue – Red Square – was clearly a significant factor in the arrest and the ensuing scandal. After all, on the other side of the city, another performer was standing in a park with exactly the same placard – an action that drew no noteworthy attention and passed off without issue. Being the site of many of the most famous performance actions in post-Soviet Russian history, by the likes of E.T.I, Aleksandr Brener, Pussy Riot, and Petr Pavlenskii, Red Square carries a symbolic weight that was too much to bear for the management of the Teatr na Taganke. The failure of the theatre management in this case to support artistic freedom represents a broader ecology of intolerance and impermissibility that has gradually taken hold of Russia since 2012, when Vladimir Putin controversially returned to the presidency for a third term in office. The fact that this happened at the ‘Taganka’ of all places – which was one of the most daring and revered theatres of the late Soviet era under the artistic directorship of Iurii Liubimov – is indicative of this trend. Prior to any analysis of individual works of theatre, this new ecology must be given due consideration.

Introduction

Although 2012 has been identified as the year of the ‘conservative-authoritarian turn’ by critics, this study starts a little earlier, in 2010, when a short play called *Час восемнадцать* premiered at Teatr.doc in Moscow.¹ This was a turning point in the history of contemporary Russian theatre for reasons that are explored in Chapter One, demonstrating the age-old ability of art to capture shifts in society and politics ahead of time. In this thesis, a total of twelve works will be considered in detail, six of which are text-based plays, and six of which are text-decentred performances, where no script as such is readily available.² The final work of the twelve occurred at the end of 2019, meaning that the temporal scope of this project broadly covers the whole of the second decade of the twenty-first century, although all the close readings of specific works are drawn from the latter half of the decade. There is a practical reason for this – the fact that my research trips were conducted over a three-year period from 2017 to 2019 brought to light the more

¹ The ‘conservative-authoritarian turn’ has been noted by critics such as Lena Jonson, Nikolai Petrov, Paul Robinson, and Kate Langdon and Vladimir Tismaneanu. See Jonson, *Art and Protest in Putin’s Russia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); Petrov, ‘Putin’s Neo-Nomenklatura System and its Evolution’ in *Stubborn Structures: Reconceptualizing Post-Communist Regimes*, ed. by Bálint Magyar (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2019), pp. 179-215; Robinson, *Russian Conservatism* (Ithaca: Northern Illinois University Press, 2019); Langdon and Tismaneanu, *Putin’s Totalitarian Democracy: Ideology, Myth and Violence in the Twenty-First Century* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

² The texts for the six plays can all be found online (in order of appearance): Elena Gremina, Dmitrii Bel, and Mark Ravenhill, *Voina blizko* (Moscow: Bookmate Originals, 2020), ebook <<https://ru.bookmate.com/books/xyiqKbIw>> [accessed 20 December 2020]; Zarema Zaudinova, Ekaterina Kosarevskaia, and Aleksei Polikhovich, *Pytki* (Moscow: Bookmate Originals, 2020), ebook <<https://ru.bookmate.com/books/TJktP5oX>> [accessed 20 December 2020]; Zarema Zaudinova, Anna Dobrovol’skaia, and Elena Gremina, *Oiub* (Moscow: Bookmate Originals, 2020), ebook <<https://ru.bookmate.com/books/WcgMj9re>> [accessed 20 December 2020]; Dmitrii Danilov, ‘Chelovek iz Podol’ska’, *Novyi mir*, 2 (2017) <https://magazines.gorky.media/novyi_mi/2017/2/chelovek-iz-podolska.html> [accessed 23 December 2020]; Valerii Pecheikin, *Filosofy, ili Velikaia orgiia* (unpublished playscript, 2016) <<http://lubimovka.ru/istoriya/31-2016/285-uchastniki-lyubimovki-2016>> [accessed 23 December 2020]; Ol’ga Shiliaeva, *28 dnei* (unpublished play script, 2018) <<http://lubimovka.ru/istoriya/42-2018/516-short-list-2018>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

recent works that were premiering and being discussed during those years. Although the Russian repertoire system allows works to be seen many years – and even decades – after they were first made, the specificity of contemporary Russian theatre (and contemporary theatre in general) tends towards the capturing of the present moment, rather than towards timeless universality.³ This means that productions of new works tend to age quickly, although there are of course exceptions to this. Another factor to consider is the tendency in contemporary theatre towards ‘event-ness’ – the singularity of the event, and the unique experience for each spectator that arises from it.⁴ This is at odds with the nature of the traditional repertory system and the idea that a show can be repeated indefinitely, unchanged. Many of the works that feature in this study were one-off events or only had a handful of performances that varied from one another, and these were conscious decisions taken by the theatre makers for artistic reasons rather than out of necessity. Furthermore, I would argue that the emphasis on works produced in the latter years of the decade better captures the extent of the changes in the conditions for cultural production that have taken place – and the corresponding artistic response to those changes – as the effects of the conservative-authoritarian turn intensified over the period in question.

In what was the first monograph in English to approach the theme of specifically twenty-first-century Russian theatre, Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky advanced a thesis in 2009 that the phenomenon of so-called ‘Новая

³ The repertoire system means that at the Teatr na Taganke, for example, it is still possible to see four different works directed by the late Iurii Liubimov that premiered variously in 1964, 1968, 1974, and 2007.

⁴ ‘Event-ness’ is a term used by German theatre scholar and theorist Hans-Thies Lehmann. See Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jurs-Munby (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 106.

драма' in Russia was characterised by an overarching discourse of violence.⁵

Violence, for the authors, had three functions in 'Новая драма':

First, violence demonstrates the disintegration of the Soviet social order, indicating cultural chaos. Second, violence arises as a reflection of new, post-Soviet social practices connected with the redistribution of authority, property, symbolic and economic capital. Third, violence functions as a denotation of the sacred, of the ritual of transgression.⁶

Since its publication, this monograph has defined the field of contemporary Russian theatre scholarship in English, and it remains the best overview of the first two decades of Russian theatre after the end of the Soviet Union. However, whilst violence is certainly a defining trait of many works of post-Soviet Russian theatre, a number of people have objected to the rather structuralist attempt broadly to categorize a disparate group of dramatic texts under a single concept. Amongst them was the well-known theatre critic Kristina Matvienko, who, in an article entitled 'Путеводитель по заблуждениям и открытиям', argued that the authors disproved their own claim, stating:

Тогда выходит, что авторы «новой драмы» представляют собой однородную массу, коллектив, который пишет сочинения на заданные темы. А не это ли опровергается на трехстах семидесяти страницах «Перформансов насилия»?⁷

Furthermore, Beumers and Lipovetsky came to the conclusion that the brightest figures of the 'Новая драма' movement were moving into film, where the authors considered that their innovations were more effective, and suggested that 'Новая

⁵ The only major monograph in Russian to have preceded this was theatre critic Marina Davydova's *Konets teatral'noi epokhi* (Moscow: Zolotaia maska; OGI, 2005).

⁶ See Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009), p. 43.

⁷ Kristina Matvienko, 'Putevoditel' po zabluzhdeniyam i otkrytiyam', *Oktiabr'*, 2 (2013) <<https://magazines.gorky.media/october/2013/2/putevoditel-po-zabluzhdeniyam-i-otkrytiyam.html>> [accessed 20 December 2020].

драма’ as a theatrical phenomenon might have run its course.⁸ The decade that followed their publication revealed this not to be the case, as a new generation of original voices emerged, such as those of Pavel Priazhko, Anna Iablonskaia, and Iaroslava Pulinovich, and then another generation after them, including Natal’ia Zaitseva, Polina Borodina, and Masha Kontorovich. On the one hand, the biggest names from the first wave of ‘Новая драма’ have moved on to the larger stages of state theatres, somewhat bearing out the prediction by the authors that it would grind ‘to a halt, [...] ending in the commercial cycle’.⁹ On the other hand, the ‘Новая драма’ movement, centred around the Liubimovka Festival of Young Dramaturgy and Teatr.doc, has demonstrated its capacity for renewal, primarily through the discovery of new generations of playwrights.

The second decade of ‘Новая драма’ has been discussed by a range of scholars in *New Drama in Russian: Performance, Politics and Protest in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, edited by J.A.E. Curtis and published in 2020. In her introduction to that volume, Curtis remarks on how political developments in the region, including the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the subsequent war with Ukraine, have hastened the demise of ‘Новая драма’ as a ‘transnational project’, which formerly encompassed Russian-speaking Ukraine and Belarus.¹⁰ In the same volume, Noah Birksted-Breen argues that 2014 was the “birth” of Ukrainian New Drama’.¹¹ Likewise, Tania Arcimovich cites 2018 as the year when a distinct playwriting culture and language emerged in Belarus, where the use of the Belarusian language has become a symbol of resistance to the regime of Aleksandr

⁸ Beumers and Lipovetsky, pp. 304-05.

⁹ Ibid., p. 305.

¹⁰ J.A.E. Curtis, ‘Introduction: Recent Developments in Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian Drama’, in *New Drama in Russian: Performance, Politics and Protest in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), pp. 1-22 (p. 18).

¹¹ Noah Birksted-Breen, ‘The Watershed Year of 2014: The “Birth” of Ukrainian New Drama’, in Curtis (ed.), *New Drama in Russian*, pp. 121-40.

Lukashenko.¹² This has been intensified by the events surrounding the disputed 2020 presidential elections there, in which the Kremlin’s public backing of Lukashenko – coupled with the provision of financial and technical support, as well as rumours of a plan for deeper integration with Russia – have intensified questions of language and national identity. What is clear, though, is that in spite of many attempts to consign it to the past, ‘Новая драма’ has had a remarkable ability to reinvent itself, changing to meet new needs and demands in different contexts. Indeed, given that the term was initially adopted as a Russian version of British ‘new writing’, it is possible – even probable – that in the future it will come to signify little more than new plays, although in one sense that is what it only ever meant in the first place.¹³

Integral to the development of the style and language of ‘Новая драма’ was the emergence and proliferation of documentary theatre, which was at least partly inspired by a series of workshops run in Russia by London’s Royal Court Theatre in 1999 and 2000. Documentary techniques, such as the verbatim method (the recording, transcribing, and assembling of real speech into text for performance, characteristically using Dictaphones or similar recording devices), fed into fictional dramatic writing, which sought linguistic verisimilitude and ‘hyper-naturalism’ – the latter of which has been defined as the overidentification with a Naturalist aesthetic that locates the drama ‘where the toilets are, the scum’ which is ‘now the new “sacred”, the proper truth, that which explodes norms and rules’.¹⁴ Documentary techniques undoubtedly allowed for the shattering of linguistic, cultural, and sexual

¹² See Tania Arcimovich, ‘The Transformation of the Language of “New Drama” in Belarus, as a Reflection of a New Model of Identity’, in Curtis (ed.), *New Drama in Russian*, pp. 213-22.

¹³ Celebrated ‘Новая драма’ theatre director Kirill Serebrennikov has stated that the term means merely ‘new plays’. See Kirill Serebrennikov, ‘Foreword’, in Beumers and Lipovetsky, pp. 9-11 (p. 9).

¹⁴ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jurs-Munby (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 117.

taboos on stage, in ways that were shocking at the time. Arguably, however, this process was just theatre catching up with the cinema, where the shattering of such taboos had already occurred in the 1990s with the flood of Western films into the country, and the emergence of Russian equivalents by directors such as Aleksei Balabanov. Theatre was still in need of its own separate identity in the new post-Soviet cultural landscape, one that distinguished it from film. The emergence of documentary theatre as a major force in Russian culture is one of the ways that this was achieved. In the only work to date that exclusively addresses the history of post-Soviet Russian documentary theatre, Molly Flynn argued in her 2020 monograph *Witness Onstage: Documentary Theatre in Twenty-First-Century Russia* that the form has a ‘unique capacity to speak to a number of core cultural anxieties in contemporary Russia’.¹⁵ For Flynn, these anxieties include ‘the evidentiary status of documents, the sincerity of testimony, and the performance of justice, as well as the country’s fraught relationship with its Soviet past’.¹⁶ These issues are explored specifically in the space of the theatre more than elsewhere for reasons to do with finance (the cost of making a film can be prohibitive) and, more recently, as a result of tightening censorship. This has affected film and television most of all, which as finalised products are easier to regulate than theatre and which, due to their wider audience reach, are more closely monitored. Theatre can therefore do and say things that film and TV cannot. However, Russian documentary theatre makers have in the second decade of the twenty-first century also found ways of making their work separate and distinct from the documentary modes typical of the screen. Flynn charts the shift in documentary theatre from its pursuit of objective ‘Truth’ in the first decade of this century to

¹⁵ Molly Flynn, *Witness Onstage: Documentary Theatre in Twenty-First-Century Russia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), p. 2. I am thankful to the author for sharing the book manuscript with me prior to publication.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

explorations of subjectivity and ‘subjective truths’ in the second.¹⁷ Although her temporal scope spans the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Flynn acknowledges that her research was primarily drawn from the 2008-12 period. This was the period of the so-called Medvedev ‘thaw’ and thus mostly predates the conservative-authoritarian turn. In my first chapter, close readings of three documentary plays from more recent years consider developments that have taken place aesthetically and politically in the form since then.

Besides the three major studies mentioned above, there is a general paucity of book-length works in English or Russian dedicated to contemporary Russian theatre, although there are a couple in French.¹⁸ Theatre critic Pavel Rudnev’s monograph *Драма памяти: Очерки истории российской драматургии, 1950–2010-е* gives some consideration to the twenty-first century.¹⁹ Instead of ‘violence’ (Beumers and Lipovetsky), Rudnev employs ‘memory’ as his determining conceptual framework. Relevant to this study are his useful essays on the work of Priazhko, Pulinovich, and documentary theatre. It is also worth mentioning Marina Davydova, whose essays on a range of topics from European, North American, and Russian theatre were recently gathered together in a collected volume.²⁰ Davydova is also the editor of the theatre journal *Teatr*, which provides by far the best dedicated coverage of news and developments in Russian theatre and the broader performing arts. Contributors such as Il’mira Bolotian, Natal’ia Zaitseva, and Nika Parkhomovskaia ensure that good journalistic writing fills some of the gaps in academic research.

¹⁷ Flynn, p. 116.

¹⁸ See *Les Nouvelles Ecritures russes*, ed. by Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu (Pézenas: Domens, 2010); see also *Le Théâtre neo-documentaire: résurgence ou réinvention?*, ed. by Lucie Kempf and Tania Moguilevskaia (Nancy: NLO, 2013).

¹⁹ See Pavel Rudnev, *Драма памяти: Очерки истории российской драматургии, 1950-2010-е* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2018).

²⁰ See Marina Davydova, *Kul’tura zero: Очерки русской жизни и европейской сцены* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2018).

Given that one of my chief objectives was to investigate the extent to which contemporary Russian theatre has moved away from the text-based drama that was characteristic of the ‘Новая драма’ movement towards more hybrid forms, the range of key sources inevitably extends to various different but related fields, mainly performance studies and art history. Lena Jonson’s 2016 work *Art and Protest in Putin’s Russia*, which is focused on fine art, proved informative as I developed my approach towards this topic.²¹ Furthermore, art historian Claire Bishop and theatre scholar Andy Lavender separately offered stimulating ways of thinking and writing about performance.²² On a separate note, although it has been regarded with scepticism and a certain degree of disdain by the Russian theatrical and academic community, it is worth mentioning theatre critic Viktor Vilisov’s 2019 book *Нас всех тошнит: Как театр стал современным, а мы этого не заметили*.²³ This is the first and only book-length work by a Russian author to analyse all the biggest names in European and North American theatre and to try to set out what it is about contemporary theatre that is different from previous eras. Although Vilisov is dismissive of contemporary Russian theatre and makes some erroneous claims about British theatre that reveal a lack of knowledge, he nonetheless offers some useful – if regrettably brief – insights into his domestic scene. Vilisov undersells the vitality of the contemporary scene in his home country, not giving due credit to the small but noteworthy group of experimental theatre makers actively working there.

If the first chapter explores developments in text-based documentary theatre over the past decade, then the second chapter looks at recent experiments in hybrid

²¹ See Jonson.

²² See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012); and Andy Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

²³ Viktor Vilisov, *Nas vseh toshnit: Kak teatr stal sovremennym, a my etogo ne zametili* (Moscow: ACT, 2019).

forms of text-decentred documentary performance. The third chapter considers ‘Новая драма’ at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, reflecting on the attention paid to the body and corporeal forms of subjectivity in playwriting of the period. The plays examined in this chapter will perhaps shed some light on the status of Russian ‘Новая драма’ as it reaches the two-decade mark. Continuing with an orientation towards the body, the fourth and final chapter of this study is dedicated to a novel development in contemporary Russian theatre, which is ‘postdramatic’ in nature, and resists easy categorisation as it breaks new ground for the spectator.²⁴ Labelled by its creators as ‘Actionist theatre’, it fuses performance art with theatre to create works that reflect one of the chief preoccupations of this study – the interaction of politics and aesthetics in contemporary Russian theatre.

The text-decentred works that feature in both the second and fourth chapters of this study are part of an emerging, rather overlooked field in Russian theatre studies, which has thus far predominantly focused on text-based drama. Some of these performances take place on stages in theatre houses, whilst others re-locate to temporary spaces or out on to the city streets. Without a written playscript to refer to, alternative approaches to their analysis are required. Whilst these works remain marginal, largely ignored by the theatre establishment, this study argues that in fact they represent the most original attempts in contemporary Russian theatre to escape from the shadow of film, and finally to discover new modes and forms that capture what it is that theatre can do that other artistic media cannot. Perhaps these works offer Russia’s answer to the questions of where theatre’s place is in a world

²⁴ ‘Postdramatic theatre’ is a term coined and popularised by Hans-Thies Lehmann. It broadly advances a thesis that many forms of contemporary theatre since the 1970s have broken from the dramatic model of theatre, instead employing hybrid forms of performance and technology to create works that perhaps draw from the dramatic tradition but cannot be said to be a part of it. For Lehmann, ‘drama’ is a genre of theatre, and ‘postdramatic’ theatre is the shift to a new aesthetic paradigm that is not bound by the conventions and rules of the dramatic genre. See Lehmann, ‘Prologue’, in *Postdramatic Theatre*, pp. 16-28.

dominated by the moving image, and what it is that is unique about the theatre in the first digital century.

Capitalist Realism: The New Model of State Cultural Policy²⁵

It is difficult to separate cultural production from the social, economic, and political environment in which it takes place. As noted by scholars, the rise in immersive ‘experiences’ in theatre in Europe and North America is connected to the neoliberal economic policies that have dominated there for the past few decades or so.²⁶ Writing about art and artists in a broader sense, Bojana Kunst traces how neoliberal capitalism has defined artistic modes of production in recent times.²⁷ In this regard, contemporary Russian theatre is no exception. The patronage-based system of Russian state capitalism that has come to dominate the economy under Putin plays a defining role in theatre production, which is still highly dependent on the state for funding, as well as for the distribution of property (i.e. theatre houses, studios, facilities, etc.), and for appointments to senior managerial positions in the top state theatres. It is therefore important to understand what the regulatory regime is that determines certain factors when it comes to producing a work of theatre in Russia in the present circumstances. A grasp of cultural politics provides the necessary context

²⁵ An earlier draft of this section was previously published as an article. See Alexander Trustrum Thomas, ‘From Stalinist Socialist Realism to Putinist Capitalist Realism: Tracing Cultural Ideology in Contemporary Russia’, in Curtis (ed.), *New Drama in Russian*, pp. 53-68.

²⁶ This has been noted separately by Adam Alston, Andy Lavender, and Jen Harvie. See Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and Lavender.

²⁷ Bojana Kunst, *Artist At Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015).

for a fuller interpretation of a dramatic text or performance, one that does not isolate the work from the broader environment that it emerged from and with which it is often in dialogue. The interplay of politics and aesthetics, then, is a key concern throughout this study.

Since the inauguration of Putin for his third presidential term in 2012, at least a dozen different laws have been passed that can be said to directly or indirectly affect cultural production in Russia.²⁸ Perhaps the three best-known of these, collectively dubbed the ‘censorship laws’, all appeared within a year of each other over the course of 2013 and 2014. They relate to language usage (the so-called ‘закон о мате’), to sexual orientation (‘закон о запрете гей-пропаганды’), and finally to religious feelings, or more specifically the prohibition of anything that causes offense to such

²⁸ In chronological order, these include:

- 1) ‘O zashchite detei ot informatsii, prichiniaushchei vred ikh zdorov’iu i razvitiuu’, N 436-F3, 29 December 2010.
- 2) ‘O vnesenii izmenenii [...] v chasti regulirovaniia deiatel’nosti nekommercheskikh organizatsii, vypolniaiushchikh funktsii inostrannogo agenta’, N 121-F3, 20 July 2012.
- 3) ‘O vnesenii izmenenii [...] v tseliakh zashchity detei ot informatsii, propagandiruiushchei otritsanie traditsionnykh semeinykh tsennostei’, N 135-F3, 29 June 2013.
- 4) ‘O vnesenii izmenenii [...] v tseliakh protivodeistviia oskorbleniuu religioznykh ubezhdenii i chuvstv grazhdan’, N 136-F3, 29 June 2013.
- 5) ‘O vnesenii izmenenii [...] v sviazi s sovershenstvovaniem pravovogo regulirovaniia v sfere ispol’zovaniia russkogo iazyka’, N 190238-6, 5 May 2014.
- 6) ‘Ob utverzhdenii Osnov gosudarstvennoi kul’turnoi politiki’, N 808, 24 December 2014.
- 7) ‘O deiatel’nosti na territorii Rossiiskoi Federatsii inostrannoi ili mezhdunarodnoi nepravitel’svennoi organizatsii, v otnoshenii kotoroi priniato reshenie o priznanii nezhelatel’noi na territorii Rossiiskoi Federatsii ee deiatel’nosti’, N 129-F3, 23 May 2015.
- 8) ‘O gosudarstvennoi programme “Patrioticheskoe vospitanie grazhdan Rossiiskoi Federatsii na 2016-2020 gody”’, N 1493, 30 December 2015.
- 9) ‘Strategiia gosudarstvennoi kul’turnoi politiki na period do 2030 goda’, N 326-r, 29 February 2016.
- 10) ‘O vnesenii izmenenii [...] dopolnitel’nykh mer protivodeistviia terrorizma i obespecheniia obshchestvennoi bezopasnosti’, N 374-F3 & N 375-F3, 6 July 2016.
- 11) ‘O vnesenii izmenenii v Kodeks Rossiiskoi Federatsii ob administrativnykh pravonarusheniakh’, N 28-F3, 18 March 2019.
- 12) ‘O vnesenii izmenenii v stat’iu 15-3 Federal’nogo zakona “Ob informatsii, informatsionnykh tekhnologiakh, i o zashchite informatsii”’, N 31-F3, 18 March 2019.

feelings ('закон о защите чувств верующих').²⁹ These laws coincided with a significant change in cultural policy around the same time, in line with the broader domestic and foreign policy shifts of Putin's return to the presidency, a period which was characterised by the annexation of Crimea, military intervention in eastern Ukraine, the consolidation of power in the hands of the federal security services, an information war both internally and with the West, as well as a renewed hard line against protests and political opposition in general. Before addressing the implications of the conservative-authoritarian turn, it is worth considering what preceded it, which was an unprecedented period of financial and political investment in the cultural sphere, and the genuine materialisation of promises made by then President Dmitrii Medvedev to invest in the contemporary arts as the foundation of future social cohesion.

This 'golden age' in the history of post-Soviet Russian theatre – which was true not only in financial terms, but also in terms of the number of premieres, the number of spectators, and other indicators – ran from 2011 to 2014.³⁰ After this, the three-year funding cycles ran out and, rather than being renewed or built upon, were replaced by a new cultural conservatism, epitomised by policy statements from the new Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinskii, as well as the passing of the

²⁹ These names are how they are colloquially known and referred to in the media, rather than how they are officially worded in law.

³⁰ Theatre critic John Freedman wrote about the 'golden age' of Russian contemporary theatre in a 2010 article, midway through the Medvedev years. See Freedman, 'Contemporary Russian Drama: The Journey from Stagnation to a Golden Age', *Theatre Journal*, 62, 3 (2010), 389-420. Furthermore, the journal *Teatr* dedicated an entire issue to the theatre of the Medvedev years, and gives the following statistics: 'Для сравнения: если в 2007 году 308 государственных театров провели 64300 мероприятий для 145 575 000 зрителей, заработав при этом 2 622 325 000 рублей и получив 9 307 200 000 бюджетных денег, то уже в 2011-м театров стало на 20 больше, а количество мероприятий возросло больше, чем на десять тысяч (75100). Число зрителей также увеличилось до 168 394 000, да и заработали театры намного больше (5 109 456 000). В 2011 году по стране выпустили на 230 новых постановок больше, правда, и средняя цена билета возросла со 180 до 303 рублей.' See Nika Parkhomovskaia, '2008-2012: Teatral'nye innovatsii v deistvii', *Teatr*, 32 (2017), 16-20 (p. 19).

aforementioned censorship laws.³¹ This culminated three years later in the scandal surrounding the celebrated theatre director Kirill Serebrennikov and his company Седьмая студия, which was both born out of and was a major beneficiary of the Medvedev cultural investment programme. In many ways, the history of Седьмая студия and the three-year legal case around it (known in the media as ‘Театральное дело’) epitomised the extent of the shift in cultural policy from Medvedev to Putin, and illustrates the major challenges faced by the cultural sphere in the post-2012 era.

There are other factors that put external pressure on theatrical production besides overbearing state legislation, municipal-level harassment, and the use of financial threats and deprivation, one of these being the ever-growing and increasingly assertive power of the Russian Orthodox Church. This has been cited as the greatest problem facing the cultural sphere in the current era by Boris Mezdrich, the theatre manager who was fired from the Novosibirsk Opera House after Orthodox activists picketed a production of *Tannhäuser* there in 2015.³² The problem, which is widely acknowledged by theatre professionals, is that there are no effective mechanisms of defence for cultural production from conservative-nationalist, and religious activists. Moreover, the laws that have been passed since 2012 have had the opposite effect, emboldening those elements of society that see so-called ‘non-traditional’ culture in purely negative terms (most unfortunately this included the former Minister of Culture Medinskii himself). The two crucial documents here,

³¹ Vladimir Medinskii became Minister of Culture in May 2012 and was replaced by Ol’ga Liubimova in January 2020. He was well-known for his outspoken statements and criticism of contemporary art, and for his support of a military-patriotic cultural agenda in the arts. He complained of a culture of ‘нездоровый либерализм’ in the theatre. See ‘Medinskii “zhaleet” khudrukov, dopuskaiushchikh netsenzurnuiu leksiku v teatral’nykh postanovkakh’, *TASS*, 15 November 2018 <<https://tass.ru/kultura/5797454>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

³² Mezdrich was subsequently *persona non grata* in state theatres and it was three years before he was able to find a new position, at Praktika in Moscow. For the scandal, see ‘Novosibirsk: Direktor uvolen iz-za “Tangeizera”’, *BBC Russian*, 29 March 2015 <https://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2015/03/150329_russia_novosibirsk_theatre_director> [accessed 23 December 2020].

called ‘Основы государственной культурной политики’ (2014), and ‘Стратегия государственной культурной политики на период до 2030’ (2016) – are both legislative ‘white papers’ that received official Presidential approval, but do not contain legally binding criteria or statutes (they will henceforth be referred to respectively as Основы and Стратегия). These documents function as instruction manuals for the new state ideology, indicating how cultural production should manifest itself, the direction it should take, and the kind of language that should be used in approaching the formulation and implementation of cultural policy at the institutional and regional level.

Focusing on these two pieces of legislation that specifically address cultural policy, we can observe a clear somatic turn, or in other words there is a turn towards the body of the individual as the site of policymaking. This was one of the trademark features of Soviet-era Socialist Realism as a doctrine, shaping cultural ideology in similar ways through treating the body as the raw material in its processes. It is perhaps unsurprising to see this focus re-emerge now, given that a similar shift has already occurred in other areas such as education and national security, as the emphasis on political loyalty and the corresponding patronage network continues inexorably to extend into all areas of civic life. It is perhaps worth recalling that the former KGB officer Putin (b. 1952) and his inner circle are all people whose adult lives were largely shaped by the Soviet system, so a return to these kinds of top-down structures is both comfortable and familiar for those in power and for their chief support base, the older population demographic.

The absence of real targets or policy commitments in these two documents should not belie their significance – they transparently reveal the desire of the government to bring the cultural sphere into line behind the state apparatus, as it has

already done so successfully with the media, business, and the Church, thereby reinforcing its own power structures and the ‘managed democracy’ of the political system.³³ The Основы document sets out as its aims the regulating of ‘процессы культурного развития’, in order to, amongst other things, ‘обеспечить более высокое качество общества’. This is with the aim of ‘формирование нравственной, ответственной, самостоятельно мыслящей, творческой личности’. In the final instance, it sees cultural policy as being ‘неотъемлемая часть стратегии национальной безопасности Российской Федерации’, which can achieve the ‘гармонизация общественных отношений’ and ‘сохранение единого культурного пространства и территориальной целостности России’.³⁴

The concept of ‘culture’ is defined as ‘совокупность формальных и неформальных институтов, явлений и факторов, влияющих на сохранение, производство, трансляцию и распространение духовных ценностей (этических, эстетических, интеллектуальных, гражданских и т. д.)’.³⁵ ‘Culture’, as narrowly defined by this state legislature, is to be utilised to further political ideology on multiple fronts (domestic, foreign, social, and economic). There are strong currents of Russian exceptionalism running through the decree, with reference to its position ‘как страна, объединяющая два мира – Восток и Запад’. This includes Russia’s ‘исторический путь’ that has defined its ‘культурное своеобразие’ and the alleged ‘особенности национального менталитета’.³⁶ These vague notions, whilst often repeated and held up as truisms, are never defined in any concrete way, existing more as signifiers for how the document should be read and understood. They are indicators

³³ The ‘managed democracy’ of the post-Soviet Russian political system has been described in detail by Andrew Wilson in *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

³⁴ *Osnovy gosudarstvennoi kul'turnoi politiki*, pp. 1-3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

of intended meaning, establishing a feedback loop between the state-author and the reader, whose responsibility it is to interpret and implement the policy, repeating the language that it uses. Indeed, although the Основы are not a legally binding document, it is the case that in theatres that do not have a strong, independent-minded leadership, the document already functions as the determiner of artistic policy.³⁷ Tellingly, the editor of the journal *Teatr*, Marina Davydova, stated that the experience of reading the Основы document felt like reading a resolution by the Central Committee of the Soviet-era Communist Party.³⁸ This is the new language of the high period of Putinism (henceforth High Putinism), and it must be learnt, much as one had to learn to ‘speak Bolshevik’ (partly through the interpretation of decrees) in the early Soviet Union.³⁹

Starting from the premise that legislation is performative, the passing of a new policy into law, which is to say the moment at which it becomes a part of the legal code that defines the officially-sanctioned zone of cultural permissibility, is an act of redrawing, a redefining of the Norm. This performative dimension of lawmaking extends down to the level of language usage in the text itself. A good example of this is the introduction and subsequent proliferation, through citation and reiteration, of a constructed linguistic binary ‘traditional/non-traditional’. This first appeared in 2013 as a single-sentence addendum to the 2010 law ‘О защите детей от информации,

³⁷ This fact was told to me on separate occasions by two leading theatre managers in Moscow in 2018, which confirmed the prediction made at the time of the document’s passing in 2014 by director Boris Pavlovich, who said, ‘Символическая по качеству, эта бумага для региональных властей будет иметь силу закона’. See ‘Obsuzhdenie “Osnov gosudarstvennoi kul’turnoi politiki RF”’, Meyerhold Centre, Moscow, June 2014. The unpublished transcript of this public discussion at the Meyerhold Centre was generously shared with me for the purposes of this research project.

³⁸ ‘Когда начинаешь читать проект «Основ», особенно первые статьи и тезисы, то возникает ощущение, что это какое-то постановление ЦК КПСС’. Marina Davydova, in ‘Obsuzhdenie’.

³⁹ See Steven Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 191-221.

причиняющей вред их здоровью и развитию’, but it has its origins in earlier Duma debates from 2003 and 2009, as a result of which it entered political and public discourse.⁴⁰ This new clause wrote into law that material harmful to children’s health and development includes information ‘отрицающая семейные ценности, пропагандирующая нетрадиционные сексуальные отношения и формирующая неуважение к родителям и (или) другим членам семьи’.⁴¹ This clearly raises a number of serious questions, not least relating to the problematic conflation of notions of sexuality, family hierarchy, and ‘values’ broadly conceived, but my attention here is on the appearance of the term ‘non-traditional’ [нетрадиционный]. The immediate consequence of this legislative intervention is that this term becomes a real, legitimate language usage in political and cultural discourse, drawing an officially-sanctioned ontological distinction between ‘types’ of sexuality – traditional and non-traditional – a distinction that did not previously exist in law as such.⁴² What we see as a result of this is that the notion of the ‘non-traditional’, which is here applied specifically to sexual relations (i.e. homosexuality), then gets taken up and applied more generally to other spheres, and ultimately reaches as far as cultural policy. This appeared in a late draft of the Основы document seen by leading cultural figures, where in open terms an opposition was drawn between so-called ‘traditional’ culture as being good and healthy, and non-traditional culture as being ‘псевдокультура’ – by implication bad, not real culture, and undesirable. Although the word ‘псевдокультура’ does not

⁴⁰ Dan Healey claims that the ‘traditional/non-traditional’ opposition had been circulating ‘in media and popular sexological discourse for some twenty years’ before the introduction of the new law in 2013. See Healey, *Russian Homophobia From Stalin to Sochi* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 10. For an overview of the genealogy of this new term, see Healey, pp. 6-13.

⁴¹ ‘*O zashchite detei...*’ (2013 ed.), p. 4.

⁴² However, a distinction between types of sexuality has existed previously, and can be traced back to Stalin’s re-introduction of the pre-revolutionary law against sodomy in 1933-34, which had been repealed during the wave of progressive social policies in the 1920s, and which was repealed again in the 1990s during Boris El’tsin’s liberalisations.

appear in the final version of the document that was officially approved, it nonetheless speaks volumes about the policymakers' view of art and culture in general that it was present in the text until a very late stage of the document's formation.⁴³ This notion of 'псевдокультура' had been publicly echoed by the Minister of Culture himself in 2013, when he negatively assessed contemporary art as being akin to the emperor's new clothes, and as such not something that the state should be financing.⁴⁴ The abstract notion of 'tradition' subsequently became a guiding principle in cultural policy, and proliferates in both the Основы and the later Стратегия. This is significant because it becomes the premise for an actively interventionist cultural policy, especially relating to youth culture and educational development, and also as a more general justification for imposing upon the body of the individual through legislation. Given the conservative nature of Soviet-era Socialist Realism, which propounded neo-classicism in architecture and realism in art, recent state cultural policy would appear to be adopting a similar ideological standpoint in relation to questions around what culture is, how it should be produced, and what function it should play in society.

Another example of legal language working performatively appears in the Основы, where it is stated early on that one of the main aims of the new state cultural policy is 'формирование гармонично развитой личности'.⁴⁵ This phrase and its derivatives have a history that traces back at least as far as the 1920s, when it was

⁴³ This word was clearly present in the draft seen by director Kirill Serebrennikov, who criticised its usage and demanded its removal during the aforementioned public discussion at the Meyerhold Centre in 2014. See 'Obsuzhdenie'.

⁴⁴ See Aleksei Iablokov, 'V 2014 gody gosudarstvo vser'ez voz'metsia za kul'turu', *Vedomosti*, 11 October 2013 <www.vedomosti.ru/lifestyle/articles/2013/10/11/v-2014-godu-gosudarstvo-vserez-vozmetsya-za-kulturu> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁴⁵ *Osnovy*, p. 5.

used in Proletkul't theory.⁴⁶ It became a central tenet of Socialist Realism, in which artists were expected to be 'инженеры человеческих душ', and engage in 'воспитание трудящихся людей в духе социализма'.⁴⁷ Furthermore, when this new cultural policy aim is placed alongside the opposition of the traditional and the non-traditional, it becomes clear that artists are essentially once again expected to be 'инженеры человеческих душ', proactively taking a correct, moral, patriotic approach to their art in accordance with state political ideology. There is talk of the need for the 'качественное обновление личности' in order to achieve the aims of the new cultural policy.⁴⁸ The deployment of this sort of language recalls the notion of the 'positive hero' so central to Socialist Realist aesthetics.⁴⁹ Once the 'обновление личности' has been achieved, this idealised, renewed person would have a textbook knowledge of correct and pure 'эталонный русский литературный язык' (which they would use at all times, acknowledging no other registers of language), as well as a commanding grasp of the moral, ethical and aesthetic principles of art and culture (of the purely 'traditional' kind), grounded as these should be in the traditional family unit as the foundation of all social values.⁵⁰ The question of language norms – and who defines 'standard' and 'literary' language – has its own history, which traces back to 1920s debates that informed the later development of Socialist Realist literary dogma.⁵¹

⁴⁶ See Konstantin Rudnitskii, *Russian and Soviet Theater, 1905-1932*, trans. by Roxane Permar (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988), p. 45.

⁴⁷ Andrei Zhdanov, speaking at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934. Abridged text available on *VikiChtenie* <<https://biography.wikireading.ru/184434>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁴⁸ *Osnovy*, p. 3.

⁴⁹ See Régine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 299. See also Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

⁵⁰ *Osnovy*, p. 8.

⁵¹ In 1928 Viktor Shklovskii criticised Maksim Gor'kii, who played a key role in the defining of what became Soviet Socialist Realist literary language norms in the 1930s, stating that 'he

In recent legislation, these debates resurfaced in the 2014 ‘закон о мате’, which banned all so-called ‘нецензурная брань’ from the public realm, printed or spoken (including books, cinema, theatre, music, and public performance of any kind).⁵² Like Socialist Realist doctrine, this is a fundamentally infantilising approach to cultural policy, as pointed out by the late Elena Gremina in her commentary on the Основы document. For Gremina, most damaging of all is that such legislation becomes a way of depriving nonconformist art, and work deemed to be immoral or even merely amoral, from receiving state subsidies, thereby functioning as another mechanism of censorship on cultural production (known informally as ‘financial censorship’).⁵³ There are other notions in the Основы that feed into this, such as the assertion that the cultural sphere is a part of national security and that it therefore must be regulated and serve a military-patriotic agenda. This dogmatic, prescriptive view of culture was set out by Medinskii in his 2015 article ‘Кто не кормит свою культуру, будет кормить чужую армию’.⁵⁴ Gremina best captured the sense of the Основы document with her assessment: ‘Культуру видят служанкой идеологии, с помощью этого документа культуру пытаются втиснуть в “прокрустово ложе” идеологии’.⁵⁵ The metaphor of the Procrustean bed is ideal for conceptualising the effect of the stream of restrictive new laws and cultural policy documents that have

takes the prose of the eighteen-nineties as his linguistic norm. He takes purely temporary rules, and practises [them] as literary dogma’. See Robin, pp. 176-77.

⁵² Work that does contain language considered obscene is strictly prohibited to minors, and must visibly show a warning sign on the front cover (if printed material) or at the venue entrance (the exception to this is film/cinema, where there is zero tolerance). Lexicon defined as ‘obscene’ by state communications department Roskomnadzor includes all Russian words derived from four widely-known root words – prudishly listed as those beginning with ‘б’, ‘п’, ‘х’, and ‘е’. See ‘Roskomnadzor poiasnil zhurnalistam, chto takoe mat’, *BBC Russian*, 25 December 2013

<https://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2013/12/131225_roskomnadzor_obscene_words_list> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁵³ Gremina, speaking at the Meyerhold Centre in 2014. See ‘Obsuzhdenie’.

⁵⁴ Vladimir Medinskii, ‘Kto ne kormit svoiu kul’turu, budet kormit’ chuzhuiu armiiu’, *Izvestiia*, 17 June 2015 <<https://iz.ru/news/587771>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁵⁵ Gremina, quoted in ‘Obsuzhdenie’.

appeared over the years since 2012. With the inscription of each new law, the parameters of the Norm are pulled in towards the regulatory centre of power (the state apparatus), making legally Other that which was previously comfortably the Norm. According to the myth, Procrustes forced his victims to fit his iron bed by stretching them out or by cutting back their limbs. The ‘one size fits all’ cultural policy contained in this document requires a similarly violent Procrustean amputation of the inherently heterogeneous cultural sphere in order to fit it into the rigid frame of a homogenous, normalising political ideology.

The sheer impossibility of conformity to the model of the ‘гармонично развитая личность’ is akin to the ‘new Soviet person’ trope in Socialist Realism – both are the generic products of ideology, rather than existing in any reality. This unrealisability of the transition from ideology to life necessitates and generates transgression of its norms. As such, a legislative policy based on such an impossible model of homogeneity is itself entirely cynical. It demands a pathological multipolarity from the individual who is subjected to it, which is necessary in order for them to be able to perform acts of conformity whilst simultaneously not ever truly conforming. This is how the technical power to determine cultural ideology achieves its aims, through the ‘othering’ of the subject, who is caught in a state of permanent instability. On the one hand, for Hannah Arendt a ‘state of permanent instability’ is an inherent characteristic of totalitarianism.⁵⁶ Her argument can be extended to Socialist Realism, as a totalitarian artistic ideology, one which Régine Robin describes as an ‘impossible aesthetic’.⁵⁷ On the other hand, for cultural theorist Mark Fisher, the contemporary condition of ‘capitalist realism’ – in which ‘it is easier to imagine the

⁵⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951; repr. Schocken Books, 2004), p. 509.

⁵⁷ See Robin.

end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism'⁵⁸ – is likewise determined by 'capitalism's perpetual instability'.⁵⁹

Given that post-Soviet Russia is a capitalist state, not a socialist one, any comparison between cultural policy now and Socialist Realism has definite limits. However, by considering the current order of things as a 'capitalist realist' phenomenon, the new cultural policy developed under High Putinism can productively be called Capitalist Realism, which both establishes the connection to, and distinguishes it from its Socialist Realist predecessor. To distinguish my usage of the term from the general Western political theory of 'capitalist realism' popularised by Fisher, the new Russian state cultural policy Capitalist Realism is capitalised (following the convention of Socialist Realism), whereas the political theory 'capitalist realism' – when it is referred to – is placed in inverted commas and is uncapitalised. To my knowledge, the term *capitalist realism* has not been applied to post-Soviet Russia in a cultural context previously, although it appeared as early as 2001 in the field of architecture, where it was used to describe the new market forces driving the construction sector and urban planning policies in Russian cities.⁶⁰ It is interesting to note this previous usage; however, given the significant deviation in the respective applications of the term – to present-day state cultural policy on the one hand, and to the market conditions for the construction sector in the 1990s on the other – a fruitful comparison is a subject for a separate study. Whilst the degree to which Putin's Russia is capitalist or not – and the precise form that it takes – is a subject for continued debate, on a basic terminological level the distinction between

⁵⁸ This phrase is attributed by Fisher to both Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek. See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), p. 2.

⁵⁹ Fisher, p. 54.

⁶⁰ See Bart Goldhoorn, 'Sources and Structure of Capitalist Realism', *Project Russia*, 24 (2001), 6-11. See also Bart Goldhoorn and Philipp Meuser, *Capitalist Realism: New Architecture in Russia* (Berlin: DOM Publishers, 2006).

Socialist Realism and Capitalist Realism is a useful one to make regardless, in terms of thinking and writing about state cultural policy then and now.

Comparing the cultural policies under Stalin and Putin respectively reveals the common generic categories that underpin Socialist Realist and Capitalist Realist aesthetics. An emphasis on the ‘гармонично развитая личность’, the ‘positive hero’, and the ‘new person’ appears across both systems. Fisher diagnoses ‘capitalist realism’ of the twenty-first century in words that could easily have been written about twentieth-century Socialist Realism: ‘the effect of permanent structural instability, the “cancellation of the long term”, is invariably stagnation and conservatism, not innovation’.⁶¹ The conservative-reactionary turn to ‘tradition’ in cultural policy under both Stalin and Putin would seem to bear out this diagnosis.

Alongside the introduction of the ideologically contingent concepts of ‘нетрадиционные сексуальные отношения’ and ‘эталонный литературный язык’, the notion of ‘history’ has also become no less subject to the machinations of state legislative power. We see in the post-2012 legislation a concerted effort to take ‘history’ as such in hand, which is to say, to control historical narratives through the performative act of legislating. In the opening pages of the Основы, it is stated that the purpose of the document is to create a new cultural policy in order to avert future social catastrophe – ‘угроза гуманитарного кризиса’ – in Russia.⁶² Such a crisis would apparently be characterised by ‘негативная оценка значительных периодов отечественной истории, [и] распространение ложного представления об

⁶¹ Fisher, p. 76.

⁶² *Osnovy*, p. 3. This phrase is repeated exactly in the Стратегия. See *Strategiia*, p. 6. The idea of creating a new cultural policy will be later developed in the Strategy into the officially titled ‘новая модель культурной политики’. It is defined as, amongst other things, ‘распространение традиционных для российского общества ценностей’ and ‘гармоничное сочетание интересов национальной безопасности, единства культурного пространства и этнокультурного многообразия страны’. See *Strategiia*, p. 35.

исторической отсталости России'.⁶³ Here are the first signals of what is later developed in the Стратегия into a juridico-legislative outlawing of the possibility of evidence-based historiography, especially if it negatively evaluates the dominant trope of neo-Soviet great-power triumphalism, in which positive memories of the Soviet era are an integral feature. History, therefore, is 'remembered' by the ruling elite, who hold the technical mechanisms of power for determining and reinscribing national history as a singular narrative, leaving all alternative, competing narratives outside the parameters of the politico-judicial space. This attempt to set historical narratives in stone, and the total denial of their contingent nature as narrative constructions, does not necessarily erase the collective memory of society, although it does in time come to dominate it, especially given the firm state control of two other important societal memory transmitters – education and the media. The act of collective forgetting, then, becomes an important feature of this particular aspect of state censorship as well.⁶⁴ In the context of the new Capitalist Realist cultural policy under Putin, however, this is perhaps unsurprising. For Fisher, the conditions of neoliberal capitalism generate 'ontological precarity', in which 'forgetting becomes an adaptive strategy'.⁶⁵ For Lydia Ginzburg, 'adaptation' is the key to understanding how it was that people, particularly free-thinking intellectuals, lived through the social upheaval of the 1930s, which saw the imposition of Socialist Realist dogma in the realm of cultural policy, and the mass political repressions that targeted

⁶³ *Osnovy*, p. 3; *Strategiia*, p. 6.

⁶⁴ Yuri Lotman considers 'forgetting' as one of three forms of collective memory in any given culture, which is to say that forgetting is no less active a process than remembering, and is just as important. See Yu. A. Lotman and B. A. Uspensky, 'On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture', *New Literary History*, 9, 2 (1978), 211-32 (pp. 215-16).

⁶⁵ Fisher, p. 56.

nonconformist artists and thinkers.⁶⁶ Whilst these epochs are entirely different in terms of the violence of the respective regimes, it is the case nonetheless that selective memory and forgetting are survival strategies of adaptation in the ontologically unstable conditions of High Putinism, just as they were during the period of High Stalinism.

It is important to view this ‘petrification’ of history and the introduction of the notion of the ‘traditional’ into political discourse as part of one and the same trend. ‘History’ and ‘tradition’ are actively employed as the conceptual weapons of the state in the fight against a perceived culture of ‘пропаганда вседозволенности и насилия’.⁶⁷ Daphne Skillen states that ‘all-permissibility’ [вседозволенность], with its Dostoevskian undertones of ‘egoism, narcissism and random acts of violence’, is a pejorative word in Russian.⁶⁸ In cultural Putinism – closely allied as it is with the resurgent Russian Orthodox Church – history and tradition are the forces of enclosure and social cohesion that protect Russian society from a harmful culture of liberal permissiveness associated with the ‘godless gay West’.⁶⁹

Further manifestations of a preoccupation with history appear in the Стратегия in relation to the fostering of the so-called ‘гармонично развитая личность’, two key elements of which, we are told, will include ‘увековечение памяти погибших в годы Великой Отечественной войны’, and ‘изучение и

⁶⁶ See Lydia Ginzburg, ‘At One With the Legal Order’, trans. by Alyson Tapp, in *Lydia Ginzburg’s Alternative Literary Identities: A Collection of Articles and New Translations*, ed. by Emily Van Buskirk and Andrei Zorin (Oxford; New York: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 383-99.

⁶⁷ *Strategiia*, p. 7.

⁶⁸ Daphne Skillen, *Freedom of Speech in Russia: Politics and Media from Gorbachev to Putin* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 18. In several of Fedor Dostoevsky’s novels, from *Преступление и наказание* (1866) and *Бесы* (1871-72) through to *Братья Карамазовы* (1879-80), the young male protagonists arrogantly and deludedly claim ‘all-permissibility’ for themselves, i.e. the right to exercise free will in an untrammelled way – with tragic consequences.

⁶⁹ Peter Pomerantsev, ‘Non-Linear War’, *LRB Blog*, 28 March 2014

<<https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2014/march/non-linear-war>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

популяризация, в том числе через медиапроекты, истории отечественной культуры и отечественной истории, включая военную историю'.⁷⁰ Both of these policy initiatives involve the 'petrification' of historical narratives in the image of the dominant political agenda, which, with the continual invocation of the officially-sanctioned memory of the Great Patriotic War and the rehabilitation of the figure of Stalin, increasingly resembles a neo-Soviet chauvinism.

The rehabilitation of Stalin is exemplified in the Ministry of Culture-sponsored film, *Танки* (2018), which Medinskii described as 'очень правильное кино'.⁷¹ He said this as a rebuff to historians and journalists, some of whom had criticised the fabricated plotline and rewriting of history to fit the current ideological trends of the day. In the film, a group of tank drivers manages heroically to escape from Nazi pursuit on the frontline in 1940, and they end up victoriously parking their tanks in Red Square, where Stalin himself is there to greet them. The working title for the film – *Увидеть Сталина* – reveals its intention by underlining the centrality of the figure of Stalin as the anchoring motif of the film, and the carrier of its ideological message.⁷² There is a rich history of Stalin appearing at the end of films in the former Soviet Union – namely in the *staliniana* 'cult of personality' classics of Socialist Realist cinema, where Stalin fulfilled a similar role to that seen in *Танки*. In Mikhail Chiaureli's classic *Падение Берлина* (1949), for example, once Red Army soldiers have taken Berlin, Stalin arrives at the scene and delivers an impassioned victory speech, which then turns into a rousing glorification of Stalin himself as the great leader. The glaring historical inaccuracy in such films was of little concern in the

⁷⁰ *Strategiia*, pp. 31-32.

⁷¹ Anton Dolin, "'Танки' Кима Друзhinина: nash otvet fil'mu Smert' Stalina', *Meduza*, 23 April 2018 <<https://meduza.io/feature/2018/04/23/tanki-kima-druzhinina-nash-otvet-filmu-smert-stalina>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁷² Furthermore, this film was released on Victory Day in 2018 and was seen as a patriotic response to the controversial British satirical comedy *The Death of Stalin*, which was banned from release in Russia at around the same time. See Dolin.

pursuit of the higher truth-value of propagandistic-symbolic imagery. The Socialist Realist artistic model is echoed in Medinskii's statement on *Танки*, that it is 'правильное кино', where its value as 'правильное' is the justification for any historical inaccuracies or fabrications in the name of a higher ideological Truth. The re-writing of history in *Танки*, the re-fetishisation of the figure of Stalin in popular culture, and the military-patriotic agenda being promoted by the Ministry of Culture are all part of the new Capitalist Realist cultural policy, which is the ideological successor of Socialist Realism. This is a strictly normative environment in which art and culture are evaluated by standards of 'correctness', or in other words, by the degree to which they conform to the political norms determined by the state.

The questions that repeatedly arise to a critical reader of the *Основы* and *Стратегия* legislative documents are: Which memories? What history? Whose culture? These are questions that are left wholly unanswered in the policy documents, where vague generalizations and unsupported assumptions are often made uncritically. The lack of specificity in the definitions of key terms gives the policymakers, propagandists, and ideologues of the regime a free hand in their interpretation and implementation of cultural policy, and this has had major consequences for the conditions of cultural production in recent years.

Bound up with the notion of the 'гармонично развитая личность' is a focus on youth, and on the human body in the process of development. This is one of the main developments in the *Стратегия* when compared with the earlier *Основы* – a shift towards the body of the child as the performative site of policy inscription in the shaping of the next generation of citizens. Early in the *Стратегия*, it is stated that new programmes directed at 'обеспечение всех видов культурной деятельности' will include 'развитие детского и молодежного движения', as well as 'патриотическое

воспитание молодежи'.⁷³ The patriotic development of citizens – with a particular focus on youth – had its own separate policy document, which covered the years 2016-20.⁷⁴ Passed into law only two months before the Стратегия, its language feeds into the elaboration of the latter document. The emphasis in these policies, which is on the so-called 'патриотическое воспитание' of young people, is placed heavily on the military – military history, military culture, and the effective militarisation of youth culture. This process of militarisation through education is nothing new in Russia, and in fact, as Michel Foucault convincingly demonstrated, military discipline is the genealogical origin of discipline in many other European social(ising) institutions, including the school, the hospital, and the prison, meaning that these seemingly disparate institutional structures have much in common.⁷⁵

Nonetheless, the evidence from these cultural policy documents shows that in recent years the militarisation of youth culture and education in Russia has accelerated and become an active government priority. The Стратегия states that this will be achieved through 'создание системы мониторинга и системы качественных и количественных показателей' to assess cultural output based on empirical data. One such indicator is 'удельный вес численности молодых людей в возрасте от 14 до 30 лет, участвующих в мероприятиях по патриотическому воспитанию'.⁷⁶ There are parallels here with the Soviet Komsomol system, which had a similar military-patriotic function and extended its definition of 'youth' up to the age of twenty eight. This imposition of the state's political ideology on to young people as they are still developing is clearly part of one and the same trend as the

⁷³ *Strategiia*, pp. 4-5.

⁷⁴ It is entitled '*O gosudarstvennoi programme "Patrioticheskoe vospitanie grazhdan Rossiiskoi Federatsii na 2016-2020 gody"*' (N 1493, 30 December 2015).

⁷⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Allan Lane, 1977; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 140.

⁷⁶ *Strategiia*, pp. 36-37.

aforementioned laws on ‘гей-пропаганда’ and ‘мат’, which are both specifically directed at the control and censorship of material available to minors. Indeed, the debates around the introduction of these laws and other similarly restrictive measures are always framed in narratives of child and youth ‘health’.

Fisher describes ‘capitalist realism’ as ‘more like a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action’.⁷⁷ It is this same atmosphere that pervades High Putinist society, which in turn conditions theatrical production. To borrow an idea from Simone de Beauvoir, we can say that one is not born, but rather becomes Other.⁷⁸ For Beauvoir, ‘Only the mediation of another can constitute an individual as an *Other*’.⁷⁹ This is to say that the theatre makers associated with ‘Новая драма’ and other nonconformist or non-normative forms of contemporary theatre in Russia are not Other intrinsically, as state cultural policymakers and the Ministry of Culture would have people believe. Their art is not alien to Russian cultural values, or a foreign seed fallen on Russian soil, as it is often framed.⁸⁰ It is Other only extrinsically, which is to say, circumstantially, due to the ever-narrowing paradigms of the Norm in the political, social and cultural realms.

⁷⁷ Fisher, p. 16. Italics in original.

⁷⁸ The original is ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, woman.’ See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage, 2010), p. 293.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Theatre critic Grigorii Zaslavskii, for example, described ‘Новая драма’ in 2004 as ‘a foreign bottle with poisoned ink’ that had ‘sailed from England’. See Beumers and Lipovetsky, p. 36.

Policy in Practice: ‘Театральное дело’

It is impossible to write about the past decade of theatre in Russia without addressing the scandal surrounding Седьмая студия and its internationally renowned director, Kirill Serebrennikov. The case, which came to be known colloquially as ‘Театральное дело’, erupted in the spring of 2017, when a number of Serebrennikov’s colleagues were arrested. It finally ended more than three years later in the summer of 2020, when the main figures in the case – including Serebrennikov – were given varying lengths of suspended sentences and heavy fines. ‘Театральное дело’ is demonstrative of how censorship of the arts functions in contemporary Russia under Putin. In relation to the hardening of cultural ideology through the paradigm of the traditional/non-traditional binary, the scandal over Serebrennikov’s ballet *Нуреев* at Moscow’s Bol’shoi Theatre in 2017 is also revealing. The ballet’s subject matter was Rudolf Nureyev, the world-renowned Soviet ballet dancer who came out as gay after he defected to the West in 1961. The depiction of his sexual orientation in Serebrennikov’s biographical ballet caused the production to be repeatedly delayed, before the director was conveniently arrested in August 2017 on unrelated and evidently spurious charges of embezzlement.⁸¹ He was placed under house arrest, where he remained for over a year and a half. Serebrennikov’s arrest was the culmination of a number of years of rising tension between the director and the authorities, as the question of whether state funding for theatres should entail political loyalty to the regime or not reached a head – a battle that Serebrennikov fought hard but inevitably lost. The production of the ballet was completed without him and

⁸¹ For a brief history of the troubled production, see ‘Otmena “Nureeva”: tri versii sluchivshegosia’, *BBC Russian*, 10 July 2017 <<https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-40372730>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

performed twice in late 2017 before an audience of the political and cultural elite. Despite winning the Golden Mask award for ‘best ballet’ in 2019, and tickets for the show being in high demand, *Нуреев* has only been performed a handful of times in the three years since the premiere.⁸²

Although the production did not break any laws as such, the depiction of Nureyev’s homosexuality on stage fell beyond the boundaries of the narrowing norms as set out in the *Основы* and *Стратегия*. The question of history is significant here too, in that an attempt has been made to control the collective memory of a historical figure, rewritten according to the ideological norms of the present political regime. In the new-old conservative-reactionary paradigm, Nureyev’s biography as a gay man must be redacted and made to fit the ‘Procrustean bed’ of High Putinist ideology, where any figure of historical significance is either heterosexual or firmly in the closet. The authorities brought the meanings of this production under control through the crude yet typical devices of power – by removing the embodiment of the idea (Serebrennikov himself) from the public sphere, by regulating the ‘abnormalities’ in the production, and finally by restricting its performance and thus tightly controlling the number of people who were able to see it, despite the considerable demand for tickets.

Serebrennikov was no stranger to the machinations of state cultural policy prior to *Нуреев*. In 2013, two of his productions for the theatre – *Отморозки*, based on a novel by Zakhar Prilepin, and Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman* – were the subject of police investigations on suspicion of breaking new so-called ‘anti-terrorist’

⁸² See Golden Mask website <https://www.goldenmask.ru/fest_25_195.html> [accessed 23 December 2020]; see Bol’shoi Theatre website <<https://www.bolshoi.ru/performances/1025/roles/#20171210190000>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

laws.⁸³ The pressure on theatres to conform to the new laws and to the social norms set out within them in turn fosters a culture of self-censorship, where the instability generated by apprehension and legal uncertainty performs the work of the censor. A number of prominent theatre makers have cited self-censorship as a real and significant problem, a part of the new reality for cultural production in contemporary Russia.⁸⁴ The case of a group of actors in the provincial town of Pskov is an example of this: they simply refused to act in Varvara Faer's verbatim drama *Банщик* in the wake of the aforementioned scandal surrounding a production of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* at the Novosibirsk Opera House in 2015. The latter production had provoked demonstrations and threats of violence from local Orthodox Christian fundamentalists, and as a result the Pskov actors were not prepared to take the risk of being caught up in a similar scandal.⁸⁵ This incident set a highly problematic precedent, and the fact that neither the Ministry of Culture nor the local authorities did anything to support or protect the actors in either case further confirmed to cultural figures that they were no longer safe to freely practice their profession in the current political climate.

Unfortunately, with state funding making up over seventy per cent of theatre budgets on average, and covering as much as ninety per cent of the cost of a ticket in

⁸³ See 'Spektakl' Serebrennikova "Chelovek-Podushka" proveriailut sledovateli', *RIA Novosti*, 3 July 2013 <<https://ria.ru/culture/20130703/947409699.html>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁸⁴ This has been stated, for example, by Marat Gatsalov of the Aleksandrinskii theatre, Mark Zakharov of the Lenkom theatre, and Konstantin Bogomolov of the Teatr na Maloi Bronnoi. See, respectively: 'Khudruk Novoi stseny Aleksandrinki: "Samotsenzura ub'et teatra kak vid iskusstva', *Rosbalt*, 13 April 2015 <<https://www.rosbalt.ru/piter/2015/04/13/1388293.html>>; Artur Solomonov, 'Mark Zakharov: samotsenzura igraet vse bol'shuiu rol'', *Artursolomonov.ru*, 24 December 2014 <<https://artursolomonov.ru/mark-zaharov-samotsenzura-igraet-vse-bolshuyu-rol/>>; Shestakova, Anna, 'Chto takoe politicheskii teatr: Opros izvestnykh moskovskikh rezhisserov i khudrukov', *Teatr*, 8 (2012) <<http://oteatre.info/chto-takoe-politicheskij-teatr-opros-izvestnyh-moskovskih-rezhisserov-i-hudrukov/>> [all accessed 23 December 2020].

⁸⁵ See 'Pskov: teatr ne otmenit spektakl' iz-za zhalob akterov', *BBC Russian*, 14 April 2015 <http://www.bbc.com/russian/society/2015/04/150414_pskov_theatre_play_scandal> [accessed 23 December 2020].

some theatres, there is little chance for the performing arts to resist such pressures on their work to conform, a problem that is only compounded by hardening state cultural policy.⁸⁶ Owing to the stranglehold of financial censorship, which presents a major obstacle to the work of nonconformist theatre, the conservative-reactionary turn in cultural ideology and the accompanying wave of legislation restricting freedom of expression will continue to dominate and determine cultural production for the foreseeable future.

Summary

There are three primary mechanisms of censorship upon theatre in contemporary Russia – legislative (the passing of restrictive laws and policy documents), financial (restricting funding to nonconformist theatres and tying funds to political loyalty), and self-censorship (where artists censor their own work to avoid potential problems). The very pervasiveness of these three censorship mechanisms working simultaneously has presented and continues to present particular difficulties for independent theatre making. The passing of laws concerning sexuality, language, religious feelings, and the interpretation of history have had the cumulative effect of instrumentalising culture in the service of the broader political aims of the state. This brought it into line with other social spheres that had been politically instrumentalised during Putin’s previous terms in office, such as the media and the Orthodox Church,

⁸⁶ See *Strategiia*, p. 8. See also Transparency International’s report on the state funding of theatres, by Igor Sergeev and others, ‘Kak rukovoditeli gosudarstvennykh teatrov platiat gonorary sami sebe’, *Transparency International Russia*, 23 October 2017 <<https://transparency.org.ru/special/teatr/>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

as well as the education and welfare systems.⁸⁷ This is expressed as such in the Стратегия, which states that current planning policies ‘не в полной мере учитывают стратегическую значимость потенциала культуры’.⁸⁸ One of the primary aims of the ‘новая модель культурной политики’, as it becomes known in the Стратегия, is the ‘гармоничное сочетание интересов национальной безопасности, [и] единства культурного пространства’.⁸⁹ The perception of the cultural sphere as a latent branch of national security, combined with the belief in the necessity of ‘единство’ as a prerequisite for its realisation, goes some way towards explaining the coercive means that the regime has adopted towards cultural policy since 2012. The eradication of the heterogeneous nature of culture, therefore, and its replacement with ‘единство’, or in other words consensus, has become – to borrow Robin’s term for Socialist Realism – the ‘impossible aesthetic’ of High-Putinist Capitalist Realism.

On the one hand there is Capitalist Realism – the ‘новая модель культурной политики’ – which amounts to something akin to Socialist Realism on a capitalist economic base. This has gradually taken shape since the conservative-authoritarian turn brought about by Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012. On the other hand there is the political theory of ‘capitalist realism’ expounded by Mark Fisher, which applies broadly to all the countries where neoliberal capitalism is the prevailing economic model. For Fisher, ‘capitalist realism’ relies on hopelessness to sustain its own illusion – that there is no alternative to the status quo. As he states, ‘it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative’.⁹⁰ In Russia, therefore, there is a doubling of the ‘no alternative’ message – there is no alternative to Putin, just as there

⁸⁷ For evidence of the latter, see Eleanor Bindman, *Social Rights in Russia: From Imperfect Past to Uncertain Future* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁸⁸ *Strategiia*, p. 10.

⁸⁹ *Strategiia*, p. 35.

⁹⁰ Fisher, p. 2. Italics in original.

is no alternative to the neoliberal economic order his regime thrives on. As a result, Putin and the economic order have become conflated as symbolic extensions of each other, and go hand-in-hand as the basis of the social contract.

For Fredric Jameson, postmodernism is the ‘cultural logic of late capitalism’.⁹¹ Following from this, Socialist Realism can be thought of as the cultural logic of Stalinism, whilst its successor Capitalist Realism is the cultural logic of High Putinism. In spite of the hopelessness and powerlessness that this logic engenders, some artists and theatre makers have gone about responding creatively in ways that resist and circumvent the censorship mechanisms of the political consensus, instead opening up alternative discourses and spaces of ‘dissensus’.⁹² What emerges in the chapters that follow is a cross section of some of these spaces of ‘dissensus’ that were to be found in contemporary Russian theatre in the latter years of the previous decade.

⁹¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

⁹² ‘Dissensus’ is Jacques Rancière’s term. In Rancière’s writings, ‘dissensus’ is opposed to ‘consensus’, where ‘consensus’ is ‘the presupposition according to which every part of a population, along with all of its specific problems, can be incorporated into a political order and taken into account’. Conversely ‘dissensus’ is that which ‘resists juridical litigation and creates a fissure in the sensible order by confronting the established framework of perception, thought, and action with the “inadmissible”’. For Rancière, a consensus must be policed, and this policing is carried out on many levels, comprising everything that goes into the regulation and maintenance of the status quo. Dissensus is the site where real politics emerges, and as such it challenges and breaks through the consensus. See Gabriel Rockhill, ‘Appendix I: Glossary of Technical Terms’, in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. and trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury Revelations, 2013), pp. 83-98 (pp. 87-9).

1) Post-Zero: Documentary Theatre after *Час восемнадцать*

Such has been the leading role of Moscow's Teatr.doc in the emergence and evolution of documentary theatre in Russia over the past two decades that it is difficult to separate one from the other. Whilst documentary theatre can now be found practised across the whole country, in terms of innovation and impact Teatr.doc remains at the centre of any discussion. This is perhaps unsurprising given the fact that it continues to be the only theatre space in the country dedicated to the documentary form, in all of its varieties. There have always been exceptions to this, however, such as the premiere of Ivan Vyrypaev's celebrated play *Кислород* (2003), and more recently two of the works of drama from Teatr.doc's repertoire that feature in Chapter Three, Dmitrii Danilov's *Человек из Подольска* (2017) and Ol'ga Shiliaeva's *28 дней* (2019). As these three fictional dramas demonstrate, the theatre's focus on the documentary mode does not preclude non-documentary forms. Rather, there exists an interplay and dialogue across the spectrum of live performance. As an alternative to Teatr.doc's brand of documentary theatre, French scholar Lucie Kempf has written about the documentary forms pioneered at the KnAM theatre in Komsomol'sk-na-Amure since the 1980s.¹ In addition to this, documentary plays sporadically appear in the repertoire of independent theatres around the country, alongside their usual offerings. This is true in Moscow theatres such as the Meyerhold Centre and Praktika, as well as in St Petersburg and in regional independent theatres.²

¹ Lucie Kempf, 'Giving Testimony in the Face of an Authoritarian Regime: The Evolution of Documentary Forms at Teatr.doc, the KnAM Theatre, and the Belarus Free Theatre', in *New Drama in Russian: Performance, Politics and Protest in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, ed. by J.A.E. Curtis (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), pp. 41-52.

² One issue of *Teatr* journal is dedicated to exploring the varied landscape of independent theatre companies throughout the country, of which there are many. It features twenty six in St Petersburg alone (the vast majority of these companies operate without a permanent performance space). See *Teatr: Geografiia nezavisimosti*, 35 (2018). It is worth noting that

It remains the case, however, that there is no theatre space in Russia dedicated to the documentary form in the way that Teatr.doc is. This is in part due to the determining role that the theatre played in the emergence of the ‘Новая драма’ movement after the turn of the century, and in part thanks to geographical factors, it being based in the Russian capital. Perhaps most significant of all was the leadership and driving force behind the theatre for the first sixteen years of its existence – the indomitable pair of theatre makers Elena Gremina and Mikhail Ugarov. Their sudden passing in 2018 was an incalculable loss, and it is difficult to overstate the importance of these two figures for the development of contemporary theatre in Russia since the turn of the century.

The work that Gremina and Ugarov did in Moscow with the most famous basement theatre in Russia, Teatr.doc, did not start out as a political project, although it appeared to become more so in its latter years, as the realities of the authoritarian slide of Putin’s third term began to affect the freedom of the cultural sphere in ways outlined above. The theatre, however, always rejected any claims that it had become more political – as Gremina stated in 2018 during what turned out to be one of her last interviews, ‘Мы не изменились. Театр.doc все так же берется за любые актуальные темы. Но изменился пейзаж вокруг него’.³ It seems reasonable to state that no Moscow-based theatre has responded more actively to the challenges of the new paradigm for artistic production in Russia than has Teatr.doc. Taking a long view of the theatre’s history, Mark Lipovetsky claims in his foreword to the collected works of Gremina and Ugarov that from the very beginning of its existence it was

the situation has changed since the publication of the journal. For example, a significant regional player, Teatr 18+ in Rostov-on-Don closed in 2020 due to financial difficulties as a result of COVID-19, as has the ‘Kvartira’ project in St Petersburg.

³ Elena Gremina, quoted in Elena Racheva, ‘Issledovanie ada v golove sovremennogo cheloveka’, *Novaia gazeta*, 15 March 2018

<<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/03/16/75819-issledovanie-ada-v-golove-sovremennogo-cheloveka>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

impossible to separate Teatr.doc's art from politics, however much the theatre makers themselves denied it:

Главной задачей Театра.doc является не столько социальная антропология (бездомные, олигархи, модели, политтехнологи, ТВ-продюсеры и т.п.), сколько политика. Особенно потому, что сюжеты, первоначально имевшие социологический интерес, — например, геи и гомофобия — тема одного из ранних спектаклей театра — становятся линией политической конфронтации и, соответственно, политических преследований.⁴

What Lipovetsky terms the 'линия политической конфронтации' can also be viewed in another way: the specificities of the conditions for cultural production in Russia are such, with censorship in all its guises and corresponding political pressure from all sides, that social theatre – and indeed socially engaged art in general – is conflated with politics and political activism to a significant degree, both by the authorities and by the viewing public.

Kempf claims that part of the resistance to the political label by theatre makers in Russia is situated in the Soviet experience, where political theatre was used by the state for propaganda purposes from the early revolutionary period onwards, rather than being a tool of protest as it historically has been in the West. This much is seemingly affirmed in Ugarov's words from 2012 when he was speaking on the radio about his theatre's newest work, *Час восемнадцать*:

Конечно, это театр политический, хотя я, например, я так воспитан, что я пугаюсь этого слова. Мне все время объясняли, что это должно быть что-то очень высокохудожественное.⁵

⁴ Mark Lipovetsky, 'Predislovie', in *Elena Gremina, Mikhail Ugarov: P'esy i teksty*, ed. by Elena Koval'skaia (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2019), pp. 5-26 (p. 19).

⁵ Mikhail Ugarov, in 'Istoriia Sergeia Magnitskogo na stsene teatra v spektakle "Час vosemnadtsat"', *Radio Ekho Moskvy*, 5 June 2010 <<https://echo.msk.ru/programs/kulshok/684833-echo/>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

Ugarov's aversion to the word 'political' is for reasons specific to Russian theatre history, more precisely to the culture and teachings of the Soviet-era theatre establishment, which promoted the 'высокохудожественное' in state theatres. It was this system and culture of theatre that 'Новая драма', spearheaded by Teatr.doc, had rejected and set out to overcome in the early 2000s. Regarding 'political theatre' in Russia, Kempf writes:

It becomes possible to understand these artists' visceral suspicion of political theatre, even when their artistic practice positions them de facto in an attitude of protest, whether direct or indirect, in relation to the state ideologies.⁶

A further issue lies in the low opinion of politics held by Russians in the post-Soviet period, to the extent that the word is often used pejoratively, with a corresponding desire to avoid being tainted by the 'political' brush. Additionally, the past decade has seen opposition to the Putin regime become a genuinely life-threatening activity, as witnessed most recently by the poisoning of opposition figure Aleksei Naval'nyi, so there is possibly also an element of shrewd judgement and adaptation at play in the refusal of the political label. It is worth noting that a rejection of politics is hardly a Russian phenomenon – indeed, for Fisher it is one of the defining traits of 'capitalist realism', which is a global phenomenon. Postmodernism in art was also characterised by political apathy, as the 'commitment' of High Modernism went out of fashion. This is not the case with Teatr.doc, however, whose practice is unequivocally one of social commitment whilst they disavow the political label, preferring instead to call their work 'civic theatre' [гражданский театр]. This is more than mere wordplay – 'civic theatre' is capable of encompassing a broader range of socially engaged topics, such as gay subjectivity (*Выйти из шкафа*, 2016) and teenage experience

⁶ Kempf, p. 45.

(*Будущее.doc*, 2018), than ‘political theatre’ can. In this respect, Gremina is justified in saying that her theatre has not changed, but rather the world around it has changed. Teatr.doc makes theatre that engages with pressing social issues, and it is for others to label their work political, perceiving in it something other than the paralysing apoliticality of mainstream art and culture funded by the state budget.

Hand in hand with ‘civic theatre’ goes another key term in the evolution of the aesthetics and discourse of Teatr.doc in its mature period – so-called ‘witness theatre’ [свидетельский театр]. This was described by Ugarov in 2012 as follows:

Свидетельский театр — разновидность театра документального. Он предполагает, что на сцене находятся реальные люди, которые были свидетелями того или иного события, о котором идет речь. Это могут быть актеры, а могут и не-актеры.⁷

This form of theatre, which is also a staging technique, marks part of the general shift away from the ‘zero position’ [ноль-позиция] – meaning a neutral, non-judgemental stance – promoted by Teatr.doc for the first eight years of its existence.⁸ As Molly Flynn observes in her pioneering study of documentary theatre in Russia, the ‘zero position’ was spectacularly broken by Gremina in 2010 with her work *Час восемнадцать*, which was ‘the first production in which the artists at Teatr.doc consciously abandoned their attempts at a zero position’.⁹ For Flynn, ‘the shift away

⁷ Mikhail Ugarov, in Anastasiia Lisitsina, ““Veriu” Stanislavskogo peremestilos’ v grazhdanskuiu ploskost’”: Interv’iu Mikhaila Ugarova”, *Gazeta.ru*, 24 July 2012 <https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2012/07/24/a_4691369.shtml> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁸ The ‘zero position’ itself derives from Roland Barthes’ theories of ‘writing degree zero’. Barthes’ essays were translated into Russian and became influential in the early 1990s. See Elena Koval’skaia, ““Zhivoi zhurnal” Mikhaila Ugarova: “I tak, i tak””, *Teatr. Mikhail Ugarov: Teoriia, praktika, politika, pedagogika*, 34 (2018), 144-91 (p. 145). *Writing Degree Zero* was first published in French as *Le degré zéro de l’écriture* in 1953, and in English in 1967. See Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Cape, 1967).

⁹ Molly Flynn, *Witness Onstage: Documentary Theatre in Twenty-First-Century Russia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), p. 48. It is no coincidence that Flynn called her book *Witness Onstage*, which is the translation of one of Ugarov’s important concepts –

from attempts at a zero position has, in part, allowed Russia's documentary theatre artists to interrogate the limitations of their own artistic practice'.¹⁰ This has had the effect of 'releasing themselves from an unattainable goal of objectivity'.¹¹

The treatment of Magnitskii's death on stage serves as the marker of a transitional phase for Teatr.doc ahead of the conservative-reactionary turn that came with Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, which ushered in an era of active persecution and the blacklisting of the theatre by the authorities. This chapter considers the period from 2010 to 2019, which has seen Teatr.doc move in directions that can in some respects be labelled as 'postdramatic' and 'post-documentary'.¹² The latter relates to the hybridisation of fact and fiction in contemporary art and culture, blurring the boundaries between documentary and other genres, as seen for example in Gremina's *Час восемнадцать*, which drew from documentary materials to create fictionally reconstructed scenes. Carol Martin calls this the 'theatre of the real', which encompasses 'both theatre about real events *and* the way real events are conceptualised using diverse means, including fiction clearly identified as such, in the service of nonfiction'.¹³

The history of Teatr.doc can be separated into three phases: the first, from 2002 to 2010, was the period of the so-called 'zero position'; the second, from 2010 to 2018, was the partial break with the 'zero position' and the aforementioned shift to

'свидетель на сцене' – and was the name of two symposiums on documentary theatre held at Teatr.doc in Moscow in the 2010s. However, Flynn does not directly address the emergence and development of 'witness theatre' as a staging technique in her study, using it more to refer to her personal involvement in some of the productions she discusses.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu, 'The Story of Russian-Language Drama Since 2000: PostDoc, the Postdramatic and Teatr Post', in Curtis (ed.), *New Drama in Russian*, pp. 23-40.

¹³ Carol Martin, 'History and Politics on Stage: The Theatre of the Real', in *Not Just a Mirror: Looking For the Political Theatre of Today*, ed. by Florian Malzacher (Berlin: Alexander Verlag Berlin, 2015), pp. 32-43 (p. 42). See also Martin, *Theatre of the Real* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

‘civic’ and ‘witness’ forms of theatre; the third phase is the post-Ugarov/Gremina period from 2018 to the present, in which the theatre’s remaining directors have each taken their own path and the theatre has devolved to a collective structure without overall artistic direction. This has included, for example, the writer and director Zarema Zaudinova creating her own theatre company under the Teatr.doc umbrella, called Отдел боли Театра.doc. It should be said that although this chapter is interested in post-‘zero position’ plays, such works are by no means the new norm in documentary theatre making. On the contrary, post-‘zero position’ works remain marginal and few in number. As Kempf points out, plays reflecting a traditional ‘zero position’ continue to be made at Teatr.doc, such as Nana Grinshtein’s *Выйти из шкафа* (2016), directed by Anastasiia Patlai.¹⁴

This chapter analyses three plays, separately at first and then in parallel. The first is one of Gremina’s last productions for Teatr.doc, *Война близко*, which deals with the highly taboo subjects of the wars in eastern Ukraine and Syria and of Russia’s annexation of Crimea. The other two are from the post-Ugarov/Gremina period, although both had significant involvement from Gremina before her passing in May 2018: *Пытки*, about the ‘Пензенское дело’, a scandal around torture in Russian prisons; and *Оюб*, about the trial of Oiub Titiev, the Chechen human rights activist. What these three documentary plays demonstrate is an affinity with the ‘theatre of the real’ (Carol Martin) and an ‘aesthetic of startling’ (Hans-Thies Lehmann) that places them firmly in the current of global trends in contemporary socially-engaged theatre practice. Together these plays reflect the ways that documentary theatre has adapted

¹⁴ Kempf, p. 47. Anastasiia Patlai is undoubtedly the torchbearer for the tradition of the ‘zero position’ in documentary theatre making in the present day. In addition to *Выйти из шкафа*, two of her other recent works – *Кантград* (2016), and *Милосердие* (2018) – also unwaveringly maintain this position.

and responded to the challenges for theatre making in Russia under the conditions of High Putinism.

How Teatr.doc Became ‘Political’

The evolution of Teatr.doc’s new genre of ‘civic theatre’ started with the abandoning of the ‘zero position’ in Gremina’s play, *Час восемнадцать* (2010), about the torture and death of Russian lawyer Sergei Magnitskii in police custody in 2009. Gremina explained this shift some years later:

«Час восемнадцать» был моим первым знакомством с тем, что происходит с людьми, которые сидят в СИЗО. С тем, насколько они бесправны, насколько их могут прессовать плохими условиями, неоказанием медицинской помощи и т.д. Мое чувство справедливости было потрясено, и ноль-позиция мне изменила, потому что трудно ассоциировать себя с человеком, который пытается и бьет.¹⁵

Gremina’s sense that the zero position ‘let her down’ [изменила] when approaching this topic, and that it was inappropriate for the task because of the difficulty of associating with a person who ‘пытает и бьет’, is an issue that will resurface throughout this chapter and the next, as the limits and corresponding evolution of the documentary genre in Russia are explored in the shifting landscape of the 2010s. The dropping of the ‘zero position’ in *Час восемнадцать* and the emergence of ‘civic theatre’ in its place – which openly took an active stance on issues – continued with landmarks such as the experimental tribunal performance *Хамсуд: Продолжение* (2012), and Polina Borodina’s verbatim work, *Болотное дело* (2015). *Хамсуд* was a one-off event that simultaneously represented a significant milestone in the

¹⁵ Gremina, quoted in Racheva, ‘Issledovanie ada’.

emergence of the genre of ‘witness theatre’ being developed by Teatr.doc during that period. It brought lawyers and journalists connected with the Pussy Riot scandal together onstage and was a moderated discussion in real time. Those on stage represented only themselves and spoke for themselves, rather than standing in for an absent other. In so doing, Teatr.doc demonstrated to its critics that the documentary genre had the capacity to evolve and respond to the challenges of the times. Accusations of appropriation, objectification, and ‘othering’ – all criticisms of traditional verbatim-style documentary theatre in recent years – could not so easily be levelled at *Хамсуд: Продолжение*, or indeed at later manifestations of ‘witness theatre’ such as Zaudinova’s *Три сестры* (2019), an event held in support of the Khachaturian sisters in their ongoing trial for the murder of their father after many years of abuse.¹⁶ ‘Witness theatre’ is clearly not a representational mode of art – there are no stage sets, props, costumes, actors, or make-believe of any kind – and in this regard it fits the trends identified in contemporary theatre by Lehmann (‘postdramatic theatre’) and Martin (‘theatre of the real’). *Хамсуд: Продолжение* became a scandal when Orthodox Church activists, accompanied by a state-media camera crew from NTV, entered the auditorium and tried to break off the discussion.¹⁷ *Болотное дело*, on the other hand, caught the attention of the authorities due to its treatment of the (evidently taboo) topic of the infamous 2012 protest on Bolotnaia Square in Moscow. Police attended the premiere of the play (where Gremina allegedly managed to put an officer to work distributing programmes), and it was not long before the theatre had

¹⁶ *Три сестры* is available to view on YouTube. See Novaia gazeta, (18+) *Teatr.doc – TRI SESTRY. Aktsiia v podderzhku sester Khachaturian*, online video recording, YouTube, 2 July 2019, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOMYr7-6Lbw>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

¹⁷ This event has been well covered by Maksim Hanukai in his article ‘After the Riot: Teatr.doc and the Performance of Witness’, *TDR: The Drama Review*, 61, 1 (2017), 43–55.

been evicted from its premises for the second time in as many years, leaving it in a state of limbo with which it is by now all too familiar.¹⁸

In contrast to the Anglo-American tradition of documentary theatre, which is historically representational, Russian documentary theatre has often sought other modes of transmitting the text to the audience, which do not involve actors getting into character and acting out the lines of a script. Derek Paget, in his most recent work on documentary theatre in the UK, analyses the phenomenon of the rehearsed reading – he describes how the actors rehearsed the parts by getting into character.¹⁹ Russian documentary theatre, on the other hand, has a varied relationship with the kind of representative mode that sees performers acting the people whose words are being used. After all, one translation of Teatr.doc's motto is 'The theatre in which no one acts' [Театр, в котором не играют]. Instead, what was developed by documentary theatre makers over the course of the first decade of this century in Russia was a 'postdramatic' approach to text; one which negated the representational mode of acting that is traditional of drama, in favour of an aesthetics of 'the real'.²⁰ In her monograph on the subject, Flynn calls this a 'non-illusory' acting style.²¹ The difference between the British and Russian approaches to documentary text is commented upon by Flynn in her experience observing a rehearsal for a reading of a Natalia Vorozhbit play in London by artists from the Royal Court, where she recalls:

¹⁸ For an overview of Teatr.doc's history up to 2018, see Chapter Six of Flynn, *Witness Onstage*, pp. 141-63.

¹⁹ Derek Paget, 'Acts of Commitment: Activist Arts, the Rehearsed Reading, and Documentary Theatre', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 26, 2 (2010), 173–193 (pp. 182-84).

²⁰ On the close connection between Lehmann's conception of the 'postdramatic' and that of 'the real', he states, 'Postdramatic theatre means: theatre of the real'. See Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jurs-Munby (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 103.

²¹ Flynn, *Witness Onstage*, p. 17.

I was struck by the conversation between performer and director in which they imagined what the speaker of the monologue might have felt at certain moments in the story and discussed how best to portray the character. This conversation appeared to me particularly paradoxical in part because I had become so accustomed to the non-illusory approaches used at Teatr.doc and other Russian documentary theatre venues, but also because the original speaker who in this case happened to be the playwright was also seated in the rehearsal room.²²

Flynn points out here the paradox of the representational mode of theatre, in which the actor must always get into character in order to create the ‘reality effect’ of the play’s fictional world.²³ The Russian documentary mode, on the other hand, developed techniques in the late 2000s that sought to neutralise the verbal transmission of the verbatim document in its journey from performer to spectator. It did this as an ethical act of responsibility to the unknowable – and thus unrepresentable – experience of the real people whose words made up the text. In other words, this was an early attempt at overcoming the problems of appropriation and objectification – perhaps even fetishization – of these real people, who were often drawn from marginal or precarious socio-economic groups, and whose experiences then somewhat problematically provided the material for the documentary play. The ethics of representation are key to the subsequent evolution of ‘witness theatre’ at Teatr.doc in the 2010s.

In *Час восемнадцать*, which was a fictionalized reconstruction of events based on documentary materials, the text was acted out by actors, but certain devices were employed by Gremina to avoid the representational fallacy of attempting literally to depict Magnitskii’s suffering on stage. Instead, the unfathomable magnitude of Magnitskii’s pain is indicated – symbolically gestured towards – by the

²² Ibid., p. 19.

²³ The ‘reality effect’ is Roland Barthes’ term, introduced in his 1968 essay of the same name. See Barthes, ‘The Reality Effect’, in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 141-48.

act of pouring boiling water over the hands of the judge who condemned him to suffer. Mark Lipovetsky commented on this moment in the play as follows:

Зритель в этот момент должен вместе с судьей закричать от боли. И если боль этого негодяя вызывает такое сострадание, то боль замученного этим судьей, этими врачами, этими охранниками ни в чем не виновного Магнитского – она какова, где ее «означающее»? Его нет и быть не может. Эта боль находится за гранью выразимого, за пределами любого языка.²⁴

The spectator's reaction, triggered by the anticipated pain of the judge, functions as an indicator towards the unknowable and unrepresentable experience of Magnitskii's painful and protracted death in custody, which is, in Lipovetsky's words, 'за пределами любого языка'. Gremina therefore finds effective theatrical solutions to this problem of representation, which does some measure of justice to the person whose suffering is being represented – namely, by finding a different form of theatrical language, one that is not representational but symbolically indicative.

The production of *Час восемнадцать* has been extensively covered by Flynn, much of which informed my understanding of this older work and its significance as a predecessor of the more recent documentary plays considered in depth later in this chapter.²⁵ In her analysis, Flynn argues that this work was a turning point for Teatr.doc because it reflected a new concern for the active 'pursuit of justice' by its theatre makers, in place of their prior concern for a more balanced depiction of the different sides to a story.²⁶ However, she stresses that this 'pursuit of justice' in the space of the theatre is not straightforward:

²⁴ Lipovetsky, 'Predislovie', p. 23.

²⁵ See Chapter Three of Flynn, *Witness Onstage*, pp. 74-96. See also Flynn, 'The Trial That Never Was: Russian Documentary Theatre and the Pursuit of Justice', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 30, 4 (2014), 307-317.

²⁶ Flynn, *Witness Onstage*, p. 94.

By pulling texts from various published and unpublished sources, using those sources to compose monologues that blend fact and fiction, and then proceeding to present these texts as evidence, the creators of *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* exploit the suspect nature of documentation in contemporary Russian culture and confront the complexities of theatrical testimony as an instrument of justice.²⁷

Exploration of the ‘suspect nature of documentation’ and documents in general is undoubtedly a core contemporary concern the world over, in the age of the extensive mediatisation and virtualisation of reality by commercially- and politically-driven technology. Flynn’s description conforms to Martin’s definition of the ‘theatre of the real’, which is only the latest attempt by theatre makers to try to make sense of the world around themselves and their place within it. Martin cites a number of contemporary works of theatre from around the world that reflect this same concern and use similar techniques of blending fact and fiction in their production of authenticity, demonstrating that this is not an exclusively Russian phenomenon.²⁸ Flynn concludes that *Час восемнадцать* shows ‘how Russian theatre artists use documentary forms to explore the intricacies of injustice’, and that ultimately ‘through their shared experience of both speaking and hearing the testimonies provided, the participants [...] negotiate collaboratively a renewed conception of justice’.²⁹ Broadly speaking, it would appear that the ‘pursuit of justice’ identified by Flynn forms part of what Curtis sees as a wider shift in Russian documentary theatre over the past decade towards human rights activism, ‘whether it is explicitly political or not’.³⁰

In 2016, Mikhail Ugarov expressed an idea that sought to respond to the growing political persecution of *Teatr.doc* – the ‘appeal to the norm’ [апелляция к

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 83-84.

²⁸ See Martin, ‘History and Politics On Stage’, pp. 35-41.

²⁹ Flynn, *Witness Onstage*, pp. 94-95.

³⁰ J.A.E. Curtis, ‘Conclusion: Summer of 2019’, in *New Drama in Russian*, pp. 259-66 (p. 261).

норме]. The phrase first appeared in a Facebook post, and is a useful paradigm for making sense of why the theatre appeared to have become more political whilst its artists continued to disavow politics and claimed to be solely theatre makers. For Ugarov, it seems, art is political only contextually, and it is only in a context of extreme deviation from ‘the norm’ that any appeal to alternative normative codes can appear revolutionary or extremist, as he wrote on Facebook:

В нашей стране, с ее девиантной властью, с перверсией на всех уровнях, — апелляция к норме может грозить обвинением в экстремизме.³¹

To speak about ‘the norm’ is simultaneously to reveal the presence of previously invisible yet nonetheless existing normative paradigms. In this regard, the act of unveiling the contingent nature of High Putinist ideological norms becomes of crucial importance in Teatr.doc’s ‘civic theatre’. There is a line at the end of *Оюб*, in which Titiev condemns the absurdity of the fabricated case against him by saying that such a case can only occur in today’s Russia: ‘Такое может быть только у нас’, he says.³² He then appeals to European colleagues outside of Russia to seek ‘меры универсальной юрисдикции’ to counteract the failure of the Russian judicial system.³³ Titiev is pointing out the divergent normative codes that exist inside and outside of Russia, which is itself an act of unveiling. As outlined earlier, law and order are performative acts, and are without essential origin, yet they rely on claims of universality and consensus to sustain their status as norms. The systemic structures that these codes rely on for their production and maintenance – the political, legislative, judicial, and penal systems – are the structures that must remain unchallenged if dominant ideological norms are to stay invisible and yet firmly in

³¹ Mikhail Ugarov, Facebook post, 18 March 2016.

³² *Oiub*.

³³ *Ibid*.

place. Such acts of unveiling the contingent nature of these structures and the ideological consensus they police clearly come with risks for the unveiler. In the same Facebook post as above, Ugarov continued: ‘Просто надо твердить о норме. И будешь, сам того не желая, революционером’. Echoing Gremina’s view mentioned previously, Ugarov always maintained the position that he and his theatre had not changed and that if they appeared to have become more political then this was only a result of the radicalisation of the political class and its organs of power.

As is well-known, charges of extremism became widespread over the course of the Putin third term and carried potentially serious consequences, including years of real time in prison. Even more serious are charges of terrorism, of which the figures at the centre of *Война близко* and *Пытки* were accused and convicted. This saw them kept in pre-trial detention centres for years before their court verdicts, after which they were transferred to prisons to serve long sentences, where many of them remain at the time of writing and will for a long time to come. Extremism and terrorism are accusations that appear in all three of the plays in this chapter, and in one way these are the leitmotifs of the High Putinist period. There are already signs that the regime has overused the charge of ‘extremism’ during the repressions of the Putin third term. Pavel Chikov, head of the human rights organization Agora, has spoken about the ‘devaluation of extremism’ in the sheer quantity of charges brought against internet users for ‘likes’ and reposts on social media, and even against videogame players.³⁴ Once charges of extremism reach a certain critical mass and become the object of public derision, they undermine confidence in the rule of law (if

³⁴ Sergei Smirnov, ‘Vlast’ ozabochena seichas, chem zaniat’ silovikov. Liuboi otvet na etot vopros – plokhaiia novost’: Pavel Chikov predchuvstvuet novuiu real’nost’’, *Mediazona*, 21 May 2019 <<https://zona.media/article/2019/05/21/pchikov>> [accessed 23 December 2020]; “‘Lovtsa Pokemonov’” vnesli v spisok ekstremistov i zablokirovali ego scheta’, *RIA Novosti*, 14 June 2017 <<https://ria.ru/20170714/1498494928.html>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

it had not already been sufficiently undermined) and, no less significantly, cease to be something that only happens to other people.

The so-called ‘Пензенское дело’, which is the subject of *Пытки*, demonstrates how a group of young men who played airsoft together became accused of training for terrorist activities and were subsequently tortured into giving false confessions of guilt. The ‘Пензенское дело’ was just one of a number of fabricated extremist networks allegedly discovered by the security services in the run-up to the 2018 presidential elections and the football World Cup held in Russia that year. This renewed wave of repressions primarily targeted marginal social groups, in this case a group of anarchists. It was enough merely to possess anarchist literature to be labelled as such. Viktor Filinkov, a computer programmer from St Petersburg, was unknown to anarchist collectives in Russia until he was announced on state media as the leader of an international network of anarchists with intentions to commit acts of terrorism. Filinkov, who was in reality little more than a programmer who supported open source coding, exemplifies this devaluation of extremism and terrorism in the latter half of the previous decade due to the arbitrary application of the terms and their overuse by the state security services. More public examples of this include variously the scandals around TV channel Dozhd’ for its counterfactual poll regarding the siege of Leningrad in 2014, Maria Motuznaia’s trial for reposting an allegedly blasphemous meme on social media site Vkontakte, and the persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses as members of an ‘extremist organisation’.³⁵ In the year 2018 alone, more than 75 per

³⁵ ‘Prokuratura ishchet ekstremizm v oprose pro blokadu’, *Dozhd’*, 30 January 2014 <https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/novosti_sajta/prokuratura_ishchet_ekstremizm_v_oprose_pro_blokadu-361646/> [accessed 23 December 2020]; ‘V Barnaule nachalsia sud nad Mariei Motuznoi. Ee obviniaut v ekstremizme iz-za kartinok “VKontakte”’, *BBC Russian*, 6 August 2018 <<https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-45082507>> [accessed 23 December 2020];

cent of cases relating to Criminal Code Article 282 on extremism were connected to the use of V Kontakte.³⁶ In the same year, according to the Russian human rights group Agora, more than four hundred people were charged for publications on the internet, forty three of whom received real time behind bars.³⁷ Clearly, in a context where internet users can be sentenced to time in prison for ‘likes’ and reposts on social media on charges of extremism, the word itself rapidly loses its intended meaning, as people realise that a so-called ‘extremist’ can in the new paradigm be anyone, and if it can be anyone then the semantic power of the word has been broken, even if its legal power has not been. Assessing the situation in 2019, Chikov stated:

Сейчас уже обвинение в экстремизме не звучит как что-то опасное, неприятное, репутационно вредное. Опасность экстремизма девальвировалась. Семь-восемь лет назад наполнение этого термина было совсем другим. Раньше «экстремист» — это был бородатый вооруженный до зубов боевик в камуфляже, а теперь — ботаник в очках за компом.³⁸

As the word экстремизм loses its connotations of marginality and abnormality, it shifts from the periphery to the centre, and opens up the ground for contestation of the norm. It is on this ground opened up by the general devaluation of extremism and terrorism as a result of the indiscriminate repression of ordinary citizens during the High Putinist period that Teatr.doc’s ‘civic’ plays operate.

Another popular concept circulating in contemporary Russian cultural discourse is that of the dichotomy of ‘horizontality’ and ‘verticality’. In the theatre,

Petr Kozlov, ‘Chto meshaet iskliuchit’ “Svidetelei Iegovy” iz rossiiskogo spiska ekstremistov?”, *BBC Russian*, 12 February 2019 <<https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-47216797>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

³⁶ ‘Bol’shinstvo ekstremistskikh del v 2018 godu byli sviazany s “Vkontakte”’, *Radio Svoboda*, 9 April 2019 <<https://www.svoboda.org/a/29871214.html>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Pavel Chikov, in Smirnov.

this relates on the practical level to staging, the gaze, atmosphere, and mood, as well as on the more general level where it is an artistic philosophy by which theatre makers approach their practice. Horizontality fundamentally relates to de-hierarchization, and opposes the traditional verticality of art and culture in modernity. As Ugarov said in this regard:

Вертикальное искусство – это когда любой разговор сводится к иерархии: Бог, ад и я посередине. На этом вся классика построена, и это хорошо, но уже слишком много шедевров в такой системе координат снято и сыграно.³⁹

In contrast to ‘vertical art’, horizontality tends to privilege the particular over the universal, in line with poststructuralism and postcolonialism. Ironically, however, it is non-particularity that Teatr.doc is accused of by some critics, who claim that documentary theatre reduces the singularity of individual experience to the general level of representation, where the person speaking is framed as the representative of a broader social group. In other words, it is accused of appropriation and objectification of the subjective experience of the social ‘other’. Writing in 2009, Beumers and Lipovetsky stated that documentary theatre ‘remains focused on group identity (with a limited number of social groups available)’.⁴⁰ They go on to conclude that ‘this explains in part why the documentary trend has shifted largely into cinema’, where according to the authors there is ‘a recognition of individuality, and with it a possible dialogue rather than the series of monologues typical of New Drama’.⁴¹

It is worth considering more closely these assertions regarding firstly group identity versus individuality, and secondly monologues versus dialogues. Whilst it is

³⁹ Mikhail Ugarov, speaking in St Petersburg in 2010. Quoted in Il’mira Bolotian, ‘Antislovar’ Mikhaïla Ugarova’, *Teatr*, 34 (2018), 122-30 (p. 124).

⁴⁰ Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009), p. 235.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

true that absent presence is always a defining feature of theatre, especially in the representational genres, there are various ways in which documentary practitioners of 'Новая драма' have approached this problem – the 'zero position' being one, and the concept of 'witnessing' being another. Beumers and Lipovetsky rightly point out the artistic fallacy of any claims to objective truth or reality, because these are concepts that only exist in culture, defined by the epistemological horizons of the time.⁴²

Whilst this may have been the case for Russian documentary theatre in the early years of the twenty-first century, when it perhaps demonstrated something of the naivety of what Ellen Rутten calls the 'new sincerity' of millennial culture in the post-Soviet space, this was clearly in retreat by the end of the decade.⁴³ Beumers and Lipovetsky's publication narrowly preceded Gremina's *Час восемнадцать*, which made the decisive break in this regard – Teatr.doc was definitively no longer attempting to represent reality 'as it really is'. There is no sense in which the figure of Magnitskii is reduced in the play to a representative of a social group or to any other generalised form. The particularity of the suffering of Magnitskii is witnessed by the audience precisely as an absent presence, and it is the awareness of the particularity of the absent other that emerges in the performance.

The particularity of the individuals who are the focus of the three texts in question here (Oleg Sentsov, Oйub Titiev, Viktor Filinkov and many others) becomes an ethical priority for the theatre makers. It is the documentary device of the monologue, in contrast to dialogue, that actively works against the representational forms inherent to drama. It is the monologue that emphasises particularity, as characters do not purely serve the expositional purposes of author or plot, but rather

⁴² Ibid., p. 214.

⁴³ Ellen Rутten, *Sincerity After Communism: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

are given the space and time to speak and be heard in their own words. Derek Paget terms this ‘speaking for’, instead of ‘standing for’.⁴⁴ If dramatic dialogue is a communication process between two performers on stage, which the spectator observes and in the act of observance becomes a third party in the interaction, then the monologue short-circuits the dialogic model of communication, directly confronting the spectator with the address aimed at them. When the performers speak to the audience rather than to each other, the dialogue is between the performer and the spectator. The spectator silently engages in this dialogue through the act of listening, as a witness to the act of the word being said. In this regard, the act of spectating is not a passive process, but an active one, as Rancière points out:

Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation. We also learn and teach, act and know, as spectators who all the time link what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed.⁴⁵

A monologue is really nothing of the kind – where there is a performer and a spectator, there is always dialogue. In theatre, therefore, the monologue is a form of unmediated dialogue between performer and spectator. This is not the aside or soliloquy of pre-modern and early modern drama, where there is a knowing pretence of artistic unity on stage. In the postdramatic monologue found in Russian documentary theatre, there is a direct communication between the performer – speaking for the absent other – and the spectator, who is confronted with the ethical challenge of accepting responsibility for the absent other from the performer. The direct mode of address implicates the spectator in the performance, and the spectator must choose whether or not to actively create dialogue for themselves in the absence

⁴⁴ Paget, p. 181.

⁴⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), p. 17.

of dialogue on stage, and thus whether or not to become a co-creator of the work's meaning.

The documentary mode described here is positioned firmly in the 'theatre of the real', in which the boundaries between reality and performance become blurred. The direct monologue is a postdramatic device that activates this uncertainty in performance. In this sense, to criticise documentary theatre, and indeed theatre in general, in terms of the cinematic medium is to deny the very different realms of discourse in which they operate. Cinema cannot break beyond the limits of the projector screen without becoming performance and no longer being strictly cinema, whereas theatre can incorporate film and projectors or do away with everything entirely besides one performer and one spectator and still remain theatre. There are evidently things that theatre can do that cinema cannot, and vice versa. A documentary film about Magnitskii's death in custody would be very different to Gremina's play, for example. Neither is it the case that any of the three documentary plays under consideration in this chapter are about group identity or social groups. These are plays about concrete individuals who each maintain their subjectivity whilst secondarily generating discourses around broader social phenomena that the theatre makers feel a responsibility to address, such as the problem of systemic torture in Russian jails and prisons.

At the rehearsed reading of *Пытки* at the Liubimovka Festival in 2018, one audience member's scathing assessment of the work during the post-performance discussion was: 'не хватает художественности'.⁴⁶ This is a familiar refrain for documentary theatre makers in Russia and indeed it has been heard throughout the

⁴⁶ The performance and discussion of *Пытки* is available to view on YouTube. See Festival' Liubimovka, *Pytki: Obsuzhdenie p'esy Ekateriny Kosarevskoi, Alekseia Polikhovicha, Zaremy Zaudinovoï*, online video recording, YouTube, 25 September 2018 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9WhaomchwM>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

history of Teatr.doc's existence. A similar view is apparent in Beumers and Lipovetsky's criticism of Russian documentary theatre. However, it is precisely in the fragmentary nature of the 'series of monologues' typical of Russian documentary theatre that a discursive resistance to the normalising and coercive mechanisms of censorship in its many guises can be located. This will be considered more closely later in regards to *Пытки*. In general terms, however, it is the monologue structure of these plays – which is the opposite of monologic – that is of crucial importance in any interpretation of their tactics of resistance and of the alternative narratives about important events inside the country that they are able to tell us.

Война близко

Elena Gremina's anti-war project *Война близко* premiered on the stage of Teatr.doc in August 2016 when the theatre was still in its third incarnation on Mal'yi Kazennyi pereulok. After the latest eviction in September 2018, the theatre euphemistically 'went on tour' whilst it searched for a new home (its fourth in as many years). *Война близко* was performed in a number of temporary locations whilst the theatre was homeless, before eventually transferring to the new premises on Sadovnicheskaia naberezhnaia – named 'DOC na ostrove', in reference to its position on Bolotnyi Island. It played in the repertoire there until the freeing of Oleg Sentsov, in a prisoner exchange between Russia and Ukraine in September 2019.

The play is comprised of a triptych of texts: the first is a war diary from the besieged city of Luhans'k sent to Teatr.doc by local resident Dmitrii Bel; the second text is a short specially-commissioned piece called *Your Voices* by British playwright

Mark Ravenhill that starkly reflects on the information war in the Syrian conflict; and the final part is a documentary text assembled by Gremina, based on the court materials from the trial of Sentsov in Rostov-on-Don in 2015. The latter text originally appeared as a standalone play called *Помолвка* but was included in its entirety in *Война близко*, so it is the full stage production of the triptych that is considered here.⁴⁷ *Война близко*, broaching as it does multiple taboo topics at once – the war in eastern Ukraine, the use of chemical weapons in Syria by the Russian-backed Assad regime, the legitimacy of the annexation of Crimea, and the torture of pre-trial detainees by the security services – takes on radical overtones contextually. Only in an environment where it is forbidden to discuss these matters, and where severe legislative measures are in place to prevent or discourage people from doing so, does a moderate anti-war play become radical and dangerous. Indeed, in November 2019, some three years after its premiere, and when the theatre had already performed the show for the last time, it was announced that the police were investigating Teatr.doc for possible propaganda of terrorism in connection with the play, charges of which were fortunately dropped the following January.⁴⁸

Война близко is to my knowledge the only example of a Russian play about the Ukrainian conflict that has managed to cross the border and be performed in Ukraine itself, although it has to be said that there are very few plays about the conflict to be found in Russia anyway, as the official Kremlin narrative continues to be that the country is not at war with its neighbour. The play was read outside the Russian Embassy in Kyiv in an abridged version by Ukrainian playwrights and founders of the ‘Новая драма’ movement Natal’ia Vorozhbit and Maksim

⁴⁷ The script for *Помолвка* can be found in Koval’skaia (ed.), *Elena Gremina, Mikhail Ugarov*, pp. 699-716.

⁴⁸ ‘Politsiia ne nashla propagandy terrorizma i narkomanii v spektakliakh Teatra.doc’, *TASS*, 14 January 2020 <<https://tass.ru/obschestvo/7518057>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

Kurochkin, along with other Ukrainian cultural figures. This was done both in memory of Gremina and as an act of protest against the continued imprisonment of Oleg Sentsov in Russia, who at the time was on hunger strike. The abridged play was subsequently read many times at various different actions throughout Ukraine in support of Sentsov and other Ukrainian political prisoners being held in Russia. In an article for *Novaia gazeta*, Vorozhbit wrote about the play:

А вообще ее нужно ставить и читать везде, где существует режим, пытки, сфабрикованные обвинения, цензура, моральное и физическое давление за нормальное, в общем, право быть свободным. Чтобы зритель ощущал почти на физическом уровне, что это может быть про него, и хотел сопротивляться.⁴⁹

The fact that the play had the power to unite people on both sides of the protracted, bloody conflict, through its performances in both Russia and subsequently on the streets of Ukraine, is testimony to Gremina’s sensitivity in handling the material and, as Vorozhbit makes clear, to the universality of the play’s themes that emerges out of the particular stories that it tells.

Whilst the death toll of Russian soldiers in Ukraine and Syria mounted, and repressions of Tatars and other dissenters in Crimea continued, a state of war became politically normalised inside the country. If, on the one hand, the state lost control of the meaning of certain words such as ‘extremism’ as a result of overexploitation, other words such as ‘patriotism’ were more successfully co-opted and brought into the arsenal of wordplay that it used to dominate public discourse in the political and cultural realms. Speaking in 2015, film director Pavel Lungin made this clear:

⁴⁹ Natal’ia Vorozhbit, in “‘Gremina – tak emko pishut tol’ko o smerti’”: Teatr.doc vypuskaet sbornik p’es, postavlennykh za 18 let’, *Novaia gazeta*, 22 May 2020 <<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/05/22/85489-gremina-tak-emko-pishut-tolko-o-smerti>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

У нас патриотизм стал как будто какой-то вещью, как будто им владеет власть, как будто бы мы не владеем патриотизмом, как будто бы мы все не патриоты. У нас отобрали патриотизм.⁵⁰

The concept of patriotism arises in the contestation of the norm in Teatr.doc's work, and in the subsequent reaction to this act of contestation by the authorities and the public alike. Indeed, 'эшники' (officers from the state counter-extremism department, Центр Э) attended the premiere of *Война близко*, and later that year Gremina was informed by a police officer that the theatre was being investigated on account of 'anti-Russian plays' in the repertoire: 'У вас же это, анти-российские спектакли идут', she was told.⁵¹

The day that the theatre world learned of the sudden passing of Mikhail Ugarov in April 2018, a block of ten tickets was bought for a performance of *Война близко*, and in place of a name on the online order form was written: 'Патриоты России придет [sic] вас пиздить'.⁵² The idea of 'Russianness' and 'patriotism' are closely entwined and both are tightly controlled and dominated by Putinist ideologues working through state media. If, as Lungin claims, the regime took patriotism away from the individual and claimed exclusive rights over its definition, then Teatr.doc sets out to reclaim patriotism and open up its semantic possibilities. In the context of *Война близко*, the dominant normative paradigm would have us believe that it is simultaneously 'anti-Russian' and 'unpatriotic' to contest the state-sponsored

⁵⁰ Pavel Lungin, speaking on TV channel Dozhd'. See Tikhon Dziadko, 'Pavel Lungin o tom, pochemu 84% - eto ne liubov', i zachem on podpisal pis'mo po Krymu', *Dozhd'*, 13 March 2015

<https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/harddaysnight/rezhisser_pavel_lungin_o_svoem_seriale_rodina_patriotizme_ljubvi_i_proshlogodnem_pisme_v_podderzhku_pozitsii_putina_po_ukraine_i_krymu-383818/> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁵¹ Anastasiia Medvedeva, "Pokhorony i menty, menty i pokhorony": kak vlasti neskol'ko let pytaiutsia zakryt' Teatr.doc', *OVD-Info*, 10 April 2019

<<https://ovdinfo.org/articles/2019/04/10/pohorony-i-menty-menty-i-pohorony-kak-vlasti-neskolko-let-pytayutsya-zakryt>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁵² Ibid.

valorisation of the separatist cause in eastern Ukraine, in addition to the cover-up of the scale of lives of Russian soldiers lost in the conflict, and the normalisation of violence that comes with the political justification and promotion of foreign war. In contrast to the perception held by state-backed nationalist groups such as SERB (who targeted and disrupted the final performance of *Война близко* in November 2019), theatre critic Pavel Rudnev describes documentary theatre as ‘самый патриотический тренд современного театра’.⁵³ Gremina’s ‘appeal to the norm’ in her play, then, is the challenge to the positive validation of the Russian state’s recent foreign interventions and land grabs, as well as the reclaiming of patriotism through anti-war discourse.

The production aesthetics of *Война близко* are typical of Teatr.doc, playing with a minimalist, non-realist style that works within its modest means efficiently and powerfully to generate discursive meaning. Examples of this include the dozen or so chairs that are gradually piled high in the centre of the stage as the description of the descent into war and destruction in Luhans’k plays out, symbolically indicating something akin to the barricades and rubble of the destroyed buildings. The pile of chairs is then dismantled and neatly rearranged over the course of the final section, *Помолвки*, as the stage transforms into a court room for the Sentsov trial. Another example of effective symbolic staging is the presence of red-and-white striped police tape across the front of the stage at the start of the performance, which acts as a visible physical barrier between performers and spectators. The spectator’s attention is particularly drawn to this tape in a moment during Ravenhill’s bleak yet lyrical Syria monologue:

⁵³ Pavel Rudnev, *Drama pamiati: Ocherki istorii rossiiskoi dramaturgii, 1950-2010-e* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2018), p. 474.

красная линия пересечена
 [...]

красная линия пересечена много раз
 нету красной линии⁵⁴

These words appear to refer to the much-derided ‘red line’ repeatedly cited by Western leaders during the Syrian conflict. They are then repeated later in the play by one of the performers in *Помолвка*, as he cuts the tape with scissors in preparation for the torturing and extraction of false testimony from one of the figures in the trial, Genadii Afanas’ev – because there is no red line for the FSB. In this way, Gremina subtly wove together the different texts in the triptych to create moments of continuity between them and to bring out their similarities.

In the process of Afanas’ev and one other figure, Aleksei Chirni, being tortured by the FSB into giving evidence against Sentsov, both men are forcibly dressed in t-shirts with the slogan ‘Крым наш’ branded in bold red letters across the front. When Afanas’ev later stands up in court and renounces his testimony as given under duress, this t-shirt is symbolically cut up and ripped from his torso in shreds. He then proceeds to tear down the ‘war decorations’, which amount to white tape in various lengths and forms that have been assembled on the back wall of the stage over the course of the performance, in a symbolic dismantling of not only the stage set but also of the fabric and fabrication of war as an aesthetic experience. Gremina’s modest staging brought out the power of the text, whilst doing justice to the absent others being represented – Oleg Sentsov, Aleksandr Kol’chenko, Genadii Afanas’ev, and Aleksei Chirni – who were the victims of torture at the hands of the FSB and of false convictions of terrorism by a Russian court. *Война близко* challenges the spectator to

⁵⁴ *Voyna blisko.*

reject the aestheticisation of violence by the state-controlled media, and to re-evaluate the state's ideological monopoly of 'patriotism' in its official promotion of war.

Пытки

Rarely does a production of Teatr.doc's 'civic theatre' go by without a media controversy or a reaction of some kind from the authorities, and *Пытки* was no exception to this. It was due to premiere in St Petersburg on 27 May 2018 (which is the city's 'День города'), the city being one of the places from which some of the anarchists in the 'Пензенское дело' were quite literally abducted from the street and transported to Penza in unmarked minivans, to bolster the numbers of those involved in the alleged terrorist network. However, the day before the play was due to be performed, the venue where it was to be staged received a call from the FSB and was threatened with closure if they allowed the event to go ahead.⁵⁵ In this instance, Teatr.doc was able to use its contacts and goodwill to find an alternative venue at the last minute and the rehearsed reading went ahead. Nonetheless, the message was clear – such topics are taboo and performances of Teatr.doc's repertoire of 'civic theatre' will not be tolerated on platforms in receipt of state funding.

Whilst it can be argued that the format of the rehearsed reading is so popular in Russia out of necessity – a result of lack of resources, lack of access to fully-equipped stages, routine harassment and difficulties with local authorities (for the more political plays) – there is more to it than pure necessity. As the format has

⁵⁵ Iulia Reprintseva, 'V Peterburge zapretili "Pytki"', *Novaia gazeta*, 26 May 2018 <<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/05/26/76610-v-peterburge-zapretili-pytki>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

evolved and become a part of the theatrical landscape of the country, so has its aesthetics, and the more progressive theatre makers are able to work within the limitations of the form to generate new kinds of aesthetic experiences and discursive meanings that are worthy alternatives to full-stage productions, rather than inferior ‘works-in-progress’ as they are often considered to be. When staged as an end product, the rehearsed reading can seize on the power of the ‘event’, often by occurring as a one-off performance, or being held sporadically, in different locations, each time in a different way, often not in theatre houses as such but in make-shift or multipurpose spaces, and spontaneously, with little forewarning. They can take on qualities of unique events that are unrepeatable, and this only enhances both the sense of one’s individual presence in attendance, and thus in attendance to, which is the responsibility implicit on the spectator as one who is present – to witness, to remember, to be changed by the event, and to make its ephemerality a part of oneself, as the carrier of its meaning. The horizontality of the rehearsed reading as a form exposes and resists the verticality of the institutional theatre hierarchy, demonstrating the possibilities for a different kind of politics in theatre aesthetics. Whilst useful comparisons can be made between this aesthetic and, for example, Jerzy Grotowski’s pioneering of ‘poor theatre’ in the 1960s, the key difference here is that there is an attempt to move beyond not only *mise-en-scène*, but also beyond acting and representation. For the creator and director of *Пытки*, Zarema Zaudinova, the rehearsed reading has broken away from traditional theatre and become ‘an independent genre’.⁵⁶

In terms of production history, the first version of *Пытки* as a text appeared in response to the Russian presidential elections held in March 2018. Teatr.doc

⁵⁶ ‘Для меня читка это в принципе самостоятельный жанр’. Zarema Zaudinova, Unpublished interview with author, Moscow, September 2019.

protested the elections with the slogan ‘Нет выборов, есть пытки’.⁵⁷ This first version of the play – which is known as the April version and was the one that was read in St Petersburg and then at the Liubimovka in September later that year – was a verbatim text, using interviews, statements, and the information that was available at that point about the ‘Пензенское дело’. Between the reading in St Petersburg in May and in Moscow in September, Zaudinova developed the idea of using a calendar projection of the innumerable military and police festivals that occur throughout the year in Russia, as a backdrop for the performers whilst they are reading the text. This staging device was used at the Liubimovka reading. Subsequently, Zaudinova recruited *Mediazona* journalist Egor Skovoroda to write a series of monologues based on the first-hand accounts, as if from the perspective of the FSB agents who carried out the torture procedures. These fictional monologues were combined with the verbatim accounts by the victims in the ‘Пензенское дело’ and resulted in a new play called *Твой календарь/Пытки*, which premiered at the Sakharov Centre in Moscow a few months later, in December of that year.⁵⁸ This version succeeded the original, purely verbatim text and is the one that has been performed ever since, including at the Royal Court in London, as well as in Prague, Berlin, Tel Aviv, and in a few other cities inside Russia.

Charting the rapid development of this work, we see that it went through three iterations in less than a year, before settling into a more or less consistent form. However, Zaudinova does not believe in playing shows often or for a long period, so once a settled form was reached, it was not long before performances naturally dried up. On the question of whether the rehearsed reading can be a completed work, she

⁵⁷ Zarema Zaudinova, Unpublished interview with author, Moscow, April 2019.

⁵⁸ The unpublished working script for *Твой календарь/Пытки* was kindly shared with the author by Zaudinova for the purposes of this research project.

stated: ‘Мне кажется, да. Ну просто это не сильно часто. [...] Ну вот свидетельские проекты долго не живут. И не должны’.⁵⁹ This approach to theatrical performance as a unique event, and the short lifespan of ‘witness theatre’ in Zaudinova’s view, means that these occurrences are easy to miss. This adds to their ephemerality, whilst also detracting from the visibility that they are able to achieve. Developments in technology mean that nowadays there is a reliance on video recordings published online to reach a greater audience than otherwise would be possible with low-publicity one-off events in small-capacity venues. However, for all its artistic virtues as a singular event, the fact that it is difficult to perform ‘witness theatre’ more than once, and a few times at most, is also a serious drawback because it can never become repertoire, which an independent theatre like Teatr.doc crucially relies on for revenue. *Твой календарь/Пытки* lost impetus after the sad conclusion of the court trials of the young men in the ‘Пензенское дело’ in early 2020, when most of them received long prison sentences ranging from six to eighteen years. The show received a further setback later that year when one of the performers, the well-known antifascist and former political prisoner Aleksei Sutuga unexpectedly died at the age of thirty four, after receiving fatal wounds in a fight in Moscow.⁶⁰

The premiere of *Твой календарь/Пытки* involved a cello player and a projector, in addition to four performers who spoke the text from memory. Although this means that it was not simply a rehearsed reading, none of the performers were professional actors. Instead, the performers are all related to the text in some way – either through personal connection to the figures involved, or through their professional activities. This included: Aleksei Polikhovich – an anarchist and social

⁵⁹ Zaudinova, Unpublished interview, September 2019.

⁶⁰ Amaliia Zatar, ‘Posledniaia draka Sokrata. Kak zhil i umer Aleksei Sutuga, odin iz samykh izvestnykh rossiiskikh antifashistov’, *BBC Russian*, 3 September 2020 <<https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-54003900>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

activist who was a victim of the Bolotnaia Square case that saw him serve more than three years of incarceration, and who now works for OVD-Info, a human rights organization that monitors arrests and detentions of citizens; the aforementioned Aleksei Sutuga, who served two prison sentences in the decade before his death on fabricated charges of extremism; and Egor Skovoroda, whose work for independent media platform *Mediazona* included covering the ‘Пензенское дело’. The fourth and final performer was Zaudinova herself. Using non-professional actors who have a direct connection to the material at hand is one of the devices of ‘witness theatre’ developed by Teatr.doc in recent years. It represents a reconfiguration of the relationship of text-performer-spectator, whereby the personal connection of the performer to the material generates a different kind of communication to that of the traditional dynamic of actor-text. If an actor does not know personally or have direct connections with the subject matter, then the distance between the actor and the text necessitates acting the text as the primary means of accessing its performative potential. By contrast, the proximity of the non-professional performer – who is implicated by personal association to the text – necessitates a non-actorly approach to its articulation. It is again a question of responsibility to the absent other. Where the actor acts in order to do justice to the one who is absent, the non-professional performer must actively do the opposite – not act – because to do otherwise would be a disservice to the absent other (not least of all because they are not trained actors). The non-professional performer’s responsibility to the absent other – which is a personal one more than an artistic one – is to stand in for the one who is absent, whilst allowing the absent presence to manifest itself onstage separately from them.

It is the case that non-professional actors were used at Teatr.doc and in documentary theatre in Russia more broadly from the very beginning of its emergence

in the early 2000s. The difference between ‘witness theatre’ and simply using non-professional actors is firstly the relationship to the text, which in ‘witness theatre’ is a personal one, and secondly the mode of speech, which in ‘witness theatre’ is in the first person, with performers speaking for themselves and as themselves. For Zaudinova, placing non-professional actors who have a personal connection to the text on stage has the effect of creating a historical document:

Обычных людей сцена моментально формулирует и делает интересными, сцена обычных людей делает документом. И ты что-то понимаешь про другого или про время, в которое вы вот с этим другим живете.⁶¹

Her words here also reflect the centrality of the ‘other’ in this form of theatre, who is given a platform to speak and be heard, in attendance to the particular subjectivity of both the one who is present and the one who is absent. In this regard, ‘witness theatre’ overcomes the accusations of ‘appropriation’ levelled at documentary theatre by a younger generation of theatre makers and critics.⁶² ‘Witness theatre’ requires that the spectator know the relevant biographical details of the performers and how they link to the text in advance of the performance for it to work to full effect, although this knowledge is not itself a prerequisite of spectating; the play will still perform without this prior knowledge, but the ethical demand that it makes upon the spectator is enhanced by full awareness of the reconfigured dynamic of performer to text.

To try to prevent the performers from acting the text, another device that Zaudinova employed in the staging of *Твой календарь/Пытки* was to swap around the distribution of the monologues for each performance. The need to learn anew and recite the monologues for the first time in each performance maintains the ‘event-

⁶¹ Zaudinova, Unpublished interview, September 2019.

⁶² See Elena Koval’skaia, ‘Krutye pandusy’, *Teatr*, 38 (2019), 52-59 (pp. 56-57).

ness' of the event for performer and spectator alike. It is a set-up that Zaudinova claims creates 'removed distance' [отстранение] between the performer and the text, and is therefore an artistic device of 'estrangement' [остранение] for the spectator. Her words regarding the exchange relationship between text, performer and spectator in this regard are revealing:

[...] к каждому спектаклю надо новые показания, их же там до хера, чтобы они их выучили, но боялись, что забудут. Они боятся, что забудут, и не успевают играть. И они читают, рассказывают, рассказывают монотонно. На одном спектакле кто-то вообще подумал, что сами ребята через это прошли. Они настолько так отстраняются от него, боясь забыть текст, тут просто режиссерская подстава такая. Все думают, что они в ахуе, монотонно рассказывают, а люди просто боятся забыть текст.⁶³

Whilst Zaudinova emphasises the practical side of negating the instinct to act and creating distance between performer and text, this is also an effective device for upholding the responsibility to the particular subjectivity of the absent other. In this way, the distancing of the performers from the delivery of the text, coupled with their personal proximity to its subject matter, generates for the spectator a complex form of estrangement, akin to a discursive 'dolly zoom' effect. The spectator is required actively to participate in making sense of this relationship of performer and text if the performance is to generate meaning. They must also respond to the challenge that it makes on the experience of spectating. When presented, for example, with testimonials of torture carried out by the security services, read by people who have been in a similar situation themselves, the dividing line between the suspended (or ahistorical) time of the performance and the 'real time' of before and after the event becomes harder to distinguish. Estrangement, therefore, not only from the text and the performer-text dynamic, but estrangement from the act of spectating itself, becomes

⁶³ Zaudinova, Unpublished interview, April 2019.

part of the power of these works, both in their resistance to normative cultural processes and in the challenge that they are able to make upon those processes. Estrangement is a well-established tactic used by political activists to challenge the claims of universality made by those in power for its ideological norms, and to reveal them as contingent, so it is perhaps unsurprising that this appears as a key artistic device in challenging the norms of the Putinist consensus by *Teatr.doc*'s 'civic theatre'.

The recruiting of experimental cellist Alina Anufrienko to provide a live soundtrack to the performance of *Твой календарь/Пытки* in the Sakharov Centre altered the structure of the play in significant ways. Firstly, the calendar of military and police festivals became much more of a focal point, projected on to the bare brick wall of the space whilst Anufrienko's music gradually shifted from deep, mournful classical melodies to excruciating screeches and harrowingly drawn-out dissonant notes, as she tapped into the well of verbally inexpressible emotions associated with brutal torture. The accused figures in the 'Пензенское дело' were tortured by FSB agents using a number of physical and psychological means, the most notorious of which was the widespread usage of electric current.⁶⁴ If Gremina indicated the unrepresentable in *Час восемнадцать* with the boiling kettle image, then Zaudinova finds an alternative route to the same realm of inarticulable suffering for which there are no words. The director herself commented in this regard, 'Крик там только у виолончели, инструмента, максимально похожего на голос человека'.⁶⁵ In other words, it is not the performers who cry out in pain or express emotion, it is the cello that does this. In the score, the contrasting passages of segments of classical music

⁶⁴ See, for example, "“Delo seti”: Kto eti lyudi i za chto ikh sudiat", *OVD-Info*, 13 May 2019 <<https://ovdinfo.org/articles/2019/05/13/delo-seti-kto-eti-lyudi-i-za-chto-ih-sudyat-gid-ovd-info>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁶⁵ Zaudinova, Private correspondence with author, 20 May 2019 (used with permission).

alternating, in Zaudinova's words, 'со звуком ломающихся костей', creates an affective environment in which the spoken text can be articulated.⁶⁶ As a consequence of the emotional expression in the play being shifted entirely to the music, the monologues recited by the performers can be delivered in an emotionless, deadpan manner, which is tailored to suit the non-professional actors performing the text from memory for the first time in public.

In *Твой календарь/Пытки*, Skovoroda created fictional testimonies that appear to be first-hand accounts by FSB officers of the practices of torture that they find most effective in extracting confessions and denunciations. Despite this fictionalisation of the documents, Zaudinova does not hesitate to call this a documentary play. In her opening remarks at the premiere in the Sakharov Centre, she declared, 'Это документальный спектакль'.⁶⁷ For the makers of *Твой календарь/Пытки*, just as was the case for Gremina in *Час восемнадцать*, there is no contradiction between the concept of 'documentary' and the fictional reconstruction of text from a certain point of view, based on existing documents. This hybridisation of documents and fictional reconstruction is what has elsewhere been called 'theatre of the real', and 'post-documentary'.⁶⁸ In a world of political 'post-truth', documentary theatre makers employ similar techniques, where truth and fact are subordinated to affect, and where it is instead possible to talk about 'affective truth'. When Skovoroda used the testimonies of the victims of torture to write the speech of the torturers, the everyday ordinariness of the language and the delivery style is in stark contrast with the extraordinariness of the content. The effect is coldly

⁶⁶ Zaudinova, Unpublished interview, April 2019.

⁶⁷ Zaudinova, in *Tvoi kalendar'/Pytki*, unpublished recording of performance by Maria Boteva, 20 December 2018, Moscow. This was kindly shared with the author for the purposes of this research project.

⁶⁸ See Martin, *Theatre of the Real*. See also Zara Abdullaeva, *Postdok: Igrovoe/neigrovoe* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2011).

inhuman, akin to something like the phenomenon described by Hannah Arendt as ‘the banality of evil’ – the automated routineness of human brutality towards other humans when following orders from above.⁶⁹

This concept can also be applied to another of Skovoroda’s collaborations with Zaudinova, *Диалоги убийц* – a verbatim play performed as a rehearsed reading in front of studio cameras for the independent TV channel Dozhd’ in January 2019.⁷⁰ This verbatim work charts eleven days of mundane conversations between two neofascists prior to their arrest for the murder of lawyer Stanislav Markelov and journalist Anastasia Baburova in Moscow a decade ago.⁷¹ Staged by Zaudinova in the form of ‘witness theatre’, the text was read by three journalists who were close to the pair, which included Skovoroda himself. In *Пытки*, however, the ‘banality of evil’ applies to the federal security services – people directly employed by the state, rather than fringe right-wing extremists – who unashamedly justify the torture of citizens (which is forbidden by the Russian Constitution) as legitimate use of force.⁷² In *Пытки*, the response from the Investigative Committee to requests to open a case regarding the reports of the torture of detainees is described:

Следственный комитет отказался возбуждать уголовное дело по жалобе программиста Виктора Филинкова, арестованного в Петербурге в рамках дела о «террористическом сообществе „Сеть“» и обвинившего сотрудников ФСБ в применении пыток. Сотрудники СК не нашли в действиях оперативников ФСБ никаких нарушений и поверили в версию

⁶⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).

⁷⁰ ‘Chitka p’esy “Dialogi ubiits”. V osnove – proslushka razgovorov ubiits Markelova i Baburovoi’, *Dozhd’*, 19 January 2019
<https://tvrain.ru/lite/teleshov/experiment/dialogi_ubijts-478993/> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁷¹ This play was based on the book of the same name, which is a transcript of the conversations recorded by the FSB between the two right-wing extremists convicted of the murders. See *Dialogi ubiits*, ed. by Egor Skovoroda (Moscow: Common place, 2019).

⁷² Article 21.2 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation
<<http://www.constitution.ru/10003000/10003000-4.htm>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

спецслужбы о применении электрошокера к Филинкову при попытке побега из автобуса.⁷³

In addition to this willful juridical banality, the St Petersburg FSB even publicly confirmed the use of torture, and the city court in turn acknowledged it as a ‘working necessity’ [служебная необходимость].⁷⁴ It is here that the normalisation of state violence towards its own citizens takes on an ideological dimension. Referring back to Ugarov’s words, it is only when the authorities themselves have become radicalised – ‘с перверсией на всех уровнях’ – that normalisation of violence can occur to such a degree whereby the torture of citizens is acknowledged by the courts as a ‘working necessity’, and where subsequent ‘appeals to the norm’ draw accusations of extremism.

In the live performance of the text, the torture methods described in Skovoroda’s monologues are acted out alternately by the four speakers upon one another, in a dispassionate, matter-of-fact delivery style. The spectator is taught the difference between some of these methods: ‘«конверт» и «ласточка», «парашют» или «холодильник», «качели» или банальное подвешивание’.⁷⁵ Far from downplaying the content, the cool style adopted by the performers in demonstrating these brutal torture methods for the spectator powerfully generates the same contradictory dissonance as heard in Anufrienko’s harrowing sounds – the creeping horror of the banality of evil. The effect is tangible, as evidenced by a standing member of the audience at the Royal Court in London needing to sit down during the performance as they became overwhelmed. The performance at the Royal Court was exemplary of the dynamic, mobile nature of this production and the genre of

⁷³ *Pytki*.

⁷⁴ This was reported on by Mikhail Ugarov in a Facebook post on 21 March 2018.

⁷⁵ Egor Skovoroda and Zarema Zaudinova, *Tvoi kalendar’/Pytki* (unpublished manuscript, 2018).

documentary theatre of which it is representative.⁷⁶ The staging advantage of the calendar projection also became apparent, as rather than needing potentially cumbersome surtitles, the calendar and a rolling translation of the monologues were combined into one seamless whole.⁷⁷ Here the adaptability that Teatr.doc has developed out of necessity over the course of its existence worked to minimise one of the common disadvantages of text-based theatre – the language barrier. According to one spectator in London, the presence of the text projected large behind the performers worked to increase the overall effect, as the visual power of the written word reinforced the action, in an assault on the senses.

The fact that this play has never been performed in the same place twice is reflective of its event-ness – the spectator becomes a participant in a unique occurrence, with a responsibility to attend to the content of the work as a result. The practical adaptability of the production means that it can be shown to a larger number and wider range of people than would be possible were it tied to the small-capacity fixed space of Teatr.doc. Whilst it is true that elaborate full-stage productions can and do tour around the world, the difference is that Teatr.doc has no state funding that it can use to finance such tours, and any touring production must operate within severe financial constraints. However, this limitation is generative in its own way, manufacturing an affective experience for the spectator, who becomes a participant in the event and consequently a co-producer of its meaning.

⁷⁶ The Royal Court performance took place on 28 March 2019. See theatre website for details: <<https://royalcourttheatre.com/whats-on/torture/>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁷⁷ *Tvoi kalendar'Pytki*, video recording (short fragment), Royal Court, 28 March 2019. Author's personal archive.

Оюб

Oiub Titiev is a human rights activist who became the head of the Chechen branch of the NGO Memorial in Grozny after the previous head, Natalia Estemirova, was murdered in 2009.⁷⁸ Memorial is an organisation that was originally conceived in 1989 to investigate political repressions in the Soviet Union, an activity which it continues to do to this day in conjunction with pursuing more recent and present-day cases of human rights violations. The activities of the regional Chechen branch of the organisation were naturally focused on the two Russo-Chechen wars (1994-96; 1999-2009), and on the repressions and disappearances of people under the current regime of Ramzan Kadyrov. Titiev was arrested in January 2018, held in police custody for over a year at the age of sixty years old, and sentenced in March 2019 on charges of intention to sell narcotics on a large scale under the notorious article 228 of the criminal code.⁷⁹ The case was clearly fabricated and Amnesty International classified Titiev as a ‘prisoner of conscience’, silenced by the authorities for his human rights activism in his native Chechnya. Titiev was conditionally released in June 2019 having served out two and a half years cumulatively in custody, but restrictions remain on what he can do (he must register regularly and cannot leave the country, for example) and his conviction remains on the record.⁸⁰ The materials from the trial were collated by Zaudinova, in collaboration with Anna Dobrovol’skaia of Memorial in Moscow. These materials were combined with verbatim interviews, quotes from

⁷⁸ ‘Desiat’ let bez pravosudiia: V etot den’ v 2009 godu byla ubita chechenskaia pravozashchitnitsa Natal’ia Estemirova’, *Amnesty International*, 15 July 2019 <<https://eurasia.amnesty.org/2019/07/15/desyat-let-bez-pravosudiya-v-etot-den-v/>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁷⁹ Article 228 is covered in more detail in Chapter Four.

⁸⁰ ‘Amnesty: Reshenie po UDO Oiuba Titieva – dolgozhdannyi shag, no ne torzhestvo spravedlivosti’, *Amnesty International*, 10 June 2019 <<https://eurasia.amnesty.org/2019/07/01/amnesty-reshenie-po-udo-oyuba-titieva-dolgozh/>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

the Quran and Hadith, Chechen cooking recipes, historical narratives, and news reports to create a documentary play.⁸¹

The first and only performance of *Oiub* to date was in an early version of the text at the Memorial head offices in Moscow in June 2018.⁸² It was directed by film and stage actor Iuliia Aug, who also performed one of the parts. As has become standard for Teatr.doc's 'civic theatre', the premiere was marked by a heavy-handed police visit. On this occasion, the police arrived at the theatre's then premises on Mal'yi Kazennyi pereulok, announcing that there was a bomb scare and that the building needed to be evacuated. Upon eventually realizing that it was not *Oiub* but in fact an uncontroversial play from the repertoire that they had interrupted, the officers promptly raced over to Memorial and announced that there was – by extraordinary coincidence – a bomb scare in that building that evening as well. However, by the time they got there, the performance of *Oiub* was over and everyone had dispersed, besides a few employees, journalists, and artists. In spite of the alleged bomb scare, the police did not attempt to evacuate any of the floors of the residential building above the Memorial offices.⁸³

The difference between the first version and the second version of the playscript is that when the first version was created and performed at the Memorial offices, Titiev's trial was still ongoing, which meant that the play ended on a somewhat inconclusive note. The second version updated the ending, inserting two

⁸¹ The play script was published online as a free ebook by Bookmate Originals. This was ahead of the publication of an anthology of Teatr.doc's documentary plays, called *Antologiya.doc*, edited by Zarema Zaudinova. See Zaudinova, Dobrovol'skaia, and Gremina, *Oiub*.

⁸² The performance is available to view on YouTube. See MBKh media, *Teatr.doc: Zapis' prem'ery spektaklia "Oiub"*, online video recording, YouTube, 13 June 2018 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2a9GLr6yCH8>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁸³ See Elena Racheva, 'O liudiakh, gotovykh k vzletu', *Novaia gazeta*, 14 June 2018 <<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/06/14/76800-o-lyudyah-gotovyh-k-vzletu>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

long verbatim monologues – one by Titiev’s lawyer, Il’ia Novikov, and one by Titiev himself. These were abridged versions of the real testimonies given by the pair directly prior to the handing down of the sentence in court. They bring an emotional vitality and affective power to the climax of the play that can only be achieved by the hyperrealism of documentary forms. Unfortunately, although this updated version of the text superseded the first version and is the one that has been published, it has never been performed on stage.⁸⁴ This is perhaps due to Zaudinova’s view that ‘civic theatre’ has a short lifespan, and perhaps the play lost some of its urgency after Titiev’s early release from prison some three months after the end of the trial. Nonetheless, given that the events in the play are still so recent, it remains relevant, as a documentation of and artistic response to the realities of High Putinism. Moreover, life in Kadyrov’s Chechnya has not changed since its publication. If anything, as Zaudinova points out, things have got worse in the republic, since now there is no branch of Memorial to monitor human rights violations there. In this regard, the play is both informative and emotionally-charged for the reader now as much as ever.

The harrowing portrayal of the state-sponsored persecution of the gay community in the critically-acclaimed documentary *Welcome to Chechnya: The Gay Purge* (HBO, 2020) by US filmmaker David France demonstrated that Chechnya is a part of the world that needs global attention. The case of Titiev is demonstrative of the systematic repression and expulsion of human rights activists from the republic over the past decade or so that has led to the dire situation there highlighted by France, in which there is no accountability or transparency for the regime’s crimes against its own people. It is hoped that artistic works such as these in theatre and film

⁸⁴ However, the updated version has been translated and produced in the UK as an English-language radio play by this author, and is available on YouTube. See TORCH, *OYUB Radio Play*, online video recording, YouTube, 18 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFrY5_ZJEus> [accessed 23 December 2020].

can bring much-needed international attention to the region and ultimately put pressure on the central Russian government to insist on the adherence to federal laws inside the republic, even though it enjoys a large degree of autonomy. Unfortunately, the laws and constitutional changes coming from the centre that demonise sexual minorities do nothing to quell homophobic violence in the peripheries.

The one-off event that took place at Memorial is a good example of the rehearsed reading as a developed genre of theatre in twenty-first-century Russia. It was staged in a makeshift performance space, with only stools and a projector for props. All the performers sat directly facing the audience and read from scripts. They were dressed in plain black clothing. The female characters wore black headscarves in addition to long black skirts. In terms of production, at one point, a video clip of a Chechen women's fashion show played silently in the background whilst the performers read from the script. Later on, a traditional song of Chechen women, 'Нохчи эшарш', is played during a scene transition. During the final section of the play, a still image of Titiev himself behind bars is shown until the end. The performance was then followed by a thirty-minute discussion, involving one of Titiev's lawyers, Il'ia Novikov (the same lawyer whose courtroom defence speech was included in the later version of the script). Far from detracting from the theatricality of the live theatre performance, the rehearsed reading – a format often employed in Teatr.doc's 'civic theatre' – can enhance the experience of the event and the feeling of presence for the spectator in ways that are qualitatively different to full stage productions of dramatic works. The unassuming performance of *Юоб* is the epitome of this alternative theatrical genre and the devices that have been developed by Russian documentary theatre makers to generate discourses of a different kind to

those of the dominant theatrical establishment, ones that challenge existing discursive norms and present the spectator with complex ethical demands.

During the sections of text that describe cooking recipes for traditional Chechen dishes, the female performers stand up, take off their headscarves, and then throughout the reciting of the recipes they proceed to fold, unfold, and re-fold the pieces of black fabric over and over again, in a ritual act of domesticity. What clearly emerges from *Оюб* is an opposition between on the one hand the feminine space, associated with affirmative cultural values and peaceful interiority, and on the other hand the masculine space, characterised by war, aggression, violence, and a generally negative culture of destruction. If the cooking scenes provide respite from the relentless horror of the Titiev case and the realities of Kadyrov-era Chechnya, then they also function as an important reference point for what could be. The peaceful, affirmative culture of Chechen women puts into stark relief the bleak destruction of the exterior world, ruled by men in a rigidly patriarchal society. The feminine interior space thus becomes loaded with the potentiality of the conditional ‘what if’ – an otherworldly affirmative alternative to the hopeless violence of the masculine exterior. In this regard, it has something in common with another Teatr.doc play from recent years that will be examined in Chapter Three – Ol’ga Shiliaeva’s *28 дней*, which also invokes an otherworldly feminine utopia, free from patriarchal oppression.

The attention to detail in the two cooking recipes that feature in *Оюб*, especially in the second of the two, which appears at the midway point of the text, becomes a painfully dissonant experience for the spectator, in large part due to the fact that on either side of it lie descriptions of the first and second Chechen wars, and

the ravaging toll that these wars took on the region. A description of творог is a striking moment of this emotional disjuncture in the text:

ЛАДА. Творог (не соленый или слабосоленый; если творог солёный, то его можно залить теплой кипяченной водой и оставить на 1 час или больше, а затем отжать) растереть, добавить яйца, соль по вкусу и нарезанный зеленый лук (чем больше лука, тем вкуснее начинка).⁸⁵

In this seemingly trivial attention to detail, the spectator can observe the juxtaposition between the masculine and feminine spatio-temporal realms in Chechen cultural life. The tempo of the play is drastically reduced by detailed descriptions such as these, which has the effect of bringing the intensity of the narrative as a whole into focus. In the context of the two Chechen wars either side of this recipe, the lingering pleasure expressed by the speaker in the description of the traditional dish – лепешка чепалгаш – becomes almost perverse, as the dichotomy of feminine and masculine increases:

ЛАДА. Лепешки после промазывания маслом получаются очень мягкими и нежными, кушать одно удовольствие.⁸⁶

The very presence of ‘sheer pleasure’ [одно удовольствие] in the nightmarish world of *Оюб* is surprising and seemingly out of place, but the startling effect that it has, alongside effects of distancing and estrangement common to Teatr.doc’s ‘civic theatre’, is a key component of the ethical challenge that this work is able to make upon the spectator. The fact of the existence of the feminine as the primary carrier of human dignity in the context of a history of continuous war and violence in modern times perhaps provides a space, however small, for the emergence of hope for the

⁸⁵ *Oiub*.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*.

future. The presence of culinary and aesthetic pleasure in the interior feminine world of the play functions as a startling reminder to the spectator of the abnormality of the exterior masculine world they are observing in the Titiev trial. In this, the domestic scenes in *Оюб* serve to prevent the spectator from allowing the violence of Titiev's world to become normalised during the performance. Furthermore, they offer a fleeting glimpse of an alternate reality for the region that is not dominated by war, torture, and oppression, but by the affirmative values of (feminine) cultural richness.

In relation to the performance history of *Оюб*, it is worth noting that Aug chose to use actors in her staging of the text. Zaudinova, on the other hand, still thinks there is scope to perform the play as 'witness theatre', read by human rights activists rather than by professional actors, and in an even more stripped-back form:

В России [«Оюб»] будет актуальным всегда. Помогаешь людям – садись в тюрьму; это же правозащита. [...] Я же вообще за то, чтобы люди, которые правозащитники, читают текст; все. Ну то есть какая-то супер простая форма, но супер действенная, потому что это люди, которые вот этим делом занимаются, и это работает, типа свидетель на сцене.⁸⁷

Zaudinova's use of the phrase 'свидетель на сцене' here is not accidental, as this was the definition used by her mentor Mikhail Ugarov for formulating the reconfigured relationship of performer to text in Teatr.doc's pioneering of 'witness theatre' earlier in the decade. The possibilities for staging *Оюб* differently suggest that even though there are no new performances of the play planned in the immediate future, there is the potential for other versions that could open up different elements of the text and offer productive material for further analysis.

⁸⁷ Zaudinova, Unpublished interview, September 2019.

Teatr.doc's 'Torture Trilogy'

Placing the three plays mentioned above alongside one another, one of the many running themes that emerges is that of torture. We see violence committed by the state and its organs of power against its own citizens and even some foreign citizens as well (Ukrainian nationals in the Sentsov case). Although these three works exist independently of each other, they have a great deal in common, as mature examples of *Teatr.doc's* pioneering genres of 'civic' and 'witness' theatre. This 'torture trilogy', as I will call it, reflects the shifting realities of High Putinism and the adaptive strategies that socially engaged documentary theatre has developed in response to these changes. Besides thematic similarities across the three texts, there are also formal elements that unite them. This is perhaps unsurprising given that they were all created within a three-year period of each other and each had the hand of Gremina behind them, even if the latter two were only completed after her passing by her protégée and close collaborator Zaudinova.

On the formal level, there are clear structural qualities that these works have in common, the most obvious one being the way that all three texts have a crescendo structure and hang on the 'final word', which functions as the climax of each play. In *Война близко*, this is the final word of Oleg Sentsov in the Russian court where he was tried. In *Пытки*, where the case had not been resolved at the time of creation, in place of a court testimony the final word is given to Mikhail Ugarov, taken from a Facebook post written shortly before his passing.⁸⁸ In *Оюб*, the closing monologue is Titiev's final testimony from Shali Town Court in Chechnya. In locating the climax,

⁸⁸ Ugarov was well known for his active online presence and commentary, firstly on LiveJournal and subsequently on Facebook. Some highlights of his LiveJournal presence are collected in the special edition of *Teatr* journal dedicated to Ugarov. See Koval'skaia, "Zhivoi zhurnal" Mikhaila Ugarova'.

which is the apex of the rising dramatic tension, at the very end of the work, and thus depriving it of a denouement, the ending is preliminary rather than resolved. The general philosophy of Teatr.doc's brand of documentary theatre is that the performance itself is only the start of the conversation, not its end point. For a documentary play to be effective, it must continue beyond the end of the show in a 'second act' of sorts, multiplying and carried out into the real world beyond the theatre by each spectator individually. Ugarov said in this regard, 'выходит из театра триста, четыреста человек – триста, четыреста спектаклей. Как правило они несут [их] с собой. И это очень важный процесс'.⁸⁹ The crescendo structure is one device that is employed by dramatists for leaving the ending hanging over, with a sense of incompleteness for the spectator. In this structure, the lack of denouement after the climax means that there is the space for the spectator to create their own denouement after the end of the performance. In Russian documentary theatre, this is often in the form of a post-show discussion, which becomes an essential component of the event and its production of meaning. The familiarity of this kind of dramatic structure – which is common in modern drama since at least Chekhov – means that this is not an alienating theatrical experience. The conventional structure of these documentary plays in this key respect acts as a point of reference and provides a supportive framework for spectators who are being challenged to respond to specific demands. It is the conventional aspect of these plays that makes them succeed as works of theatre as much as the radically challenging aspect, and indeed one without the other would likely render them less successful.

⁸⁹ Mikhail Ugarov, speaking in Kazan' in 2015 at the contemporary arts centre Smena. See BIZNES Online, *Khudruk "Teatra.doc" Mikhail Ugarov vystupil s leksiei v "Smene"*, online video recording, YouTube, 29 January 2015, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxgZ3DTzCgY>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

What also emerge over the course of all three plays are images of ‘heroes’. This is achieved by withholding information until the end and then revealing it in the form of a dramatic ‘turning point’. As a device these turning points increase dramatic tension and satisfy the spectator’s desire for intrigue and pathos, regardless of the topic. The devices of surprise and intrigue are important in this regard as much for socially-engaged documentary theatre as for other genres. Clearly channelling Walter Benjamin, Hans-Thies Lehmann states in his formulation of postdramatic theatre, ‘an *aesthetic of startling* in theatre would be another name for an aesthetic of responsibility’.⁹⁰ In *Война близко*, this ‘startling’ effect is achieved by a turning point that emerges from a running theme of ‘manliness’ [мужественность], or more precisely a question over what ‘manliness’ is. This manifestation of male insecurity and the associated crisis of masculinity first appears in the diary from Donetsk, when questions over bravery, responsibility, and duty in conditions of war come to the fore. It then gets picked up on by a direct audience address in the transition to the third section of the triptych about Sentsov:

(Актеры обращаются к публике):

Скажите, у кого есть яйца? Поднимите руки. У кого есть яйца и член?
Кто считает себя мужчиной?
Кто из вас уверен, что останется мужчиной, когда наступит момент
пиздеца?⁹¹

The actors then raise their own hands and count the hands raised in the audience. This question addressed to the audience, which is also a moment of the irruption of the real on stage, is a running motif across all three plays in this trilogy – who amongst you, spectators, believes you can withstand what the real people who figure in these plays

⁹⁰ Lehmann, p. 143. Italics in original.

⁹¹ *Voyna blizko*.

went through? What are your ethical responsibilities in response to the act of spectating? The irruption of the real, the direct audience address, the demand made by the singularity of the event and the corresponding responsibility for the absent other: all these components refer back to the question posed to the audience at this moment – who considers themselves a ‘man’, and who is certain they would remain so in a moment of extreme trial, pain, loss, and with the weight of the state apparatus against them (all of which is laconically expressed in the singular profanity ‘пиздец’)?

This same question is repeated near the end, shortly before the astonishing moment when Gennadii Afanas’ev, one of the figures heavily tortured into giving evidence against Sentsov, stands up in the courtroom and denounces his own testimony, as having been given under duress. In this moment of high drama, it becomes clear that the questions addressed to the audience regarding manliness are not in relation to the ability to withstand war or torture as initially supposed, because in fact the answer is that no one can. The real question is whether the spectator would be able to stand up in court after experiencing those things and do what Afanas’ev did – to withdraw his own evidence, with the threats of the FSB and the entire state apparatus bearing down on him. In this moment, Afanas’ev emerges as the unlikely hero of the play, and the only person worthy of raising their hand to the question posed earlier to the audience. Sentsov says as much in his final word, when he refers to Afanas’ev’s ‘manly deed’ [мужественный поступок].⁹² With this device, Gremina reveals the hero to the spectator as the play reaches its dramatic climax.

Before his emergence as the hero, Afanas’ev in *Война близко* initially lies to the audience by giving false testimony in court against Sentsov. Similarly, in *Пытки* one of the main figures of the ‘Пензенское дело’, Viktor Filinkov, lies by repeatedly

⁹² Ibid.

denying in public that he has been tortured. However, he later declares that he has indeed been tortured and that his confessions of guilt were extracted under duress. As punishment for this, Filinkov was turned by the prosecution from a minor witness in the case into the head of an international terrorist network, unimaginatively called ‘The Network’ [Сеть]. Filinkov’s crime was his willingness to speak out about his experiences: ‘Филинков больше и подробнее других задержанных говорит о пытках’.⁹³ Through his actions, Filinkov is elevated at the play’s climax to the level of a tragic hero, who sacrifices himself in the name of truth against the age-old oppressor, the state. This has a rich history in Russian culture, stretching back through the Soviet period to Imperial times. As the last piece of information that is shared with the audience before Ugarov’s brief final word, a great deal of emphasis is placed on it. This reflects how significant it is for the creators as a moment of discursive meaning, upon which the play’s structure hangs – the act of speaking out about state-level abuses of power and paying the price for it. This is one of the running themes in the ‘torture trilogy’ – the individual coming up against and being crushed by the power of the state, or in other words, the eternal trope of the ‘маленький человек’ of Russian literature and culture.

In *Оюб*, the revealing of the hero manifests itself slightly differently because Titiev is a hero from the start, so the process is more about establishing the kind of hero that he is. At regular intervals throughout the play, we are told of Titiev’s positive characteristics – he respects all people equally, and everyone respects him in return. Particular emphasis is placed on his respect for women and children: ‘Он очень любил и уважал детей. Он и старшую уважал, и младшую, особенно —

⁹³ *Pytki*.

женщин уважал, и его все уважали'.⁹⁴ Alongside the positive testimonials for Titiev from colleagues, there are quotations from and references to the Quran, as well as Islamic guidelines on how to live in truth. One of the recurring motifs is that of 'mercy', which appears on numerous occasions and is defined early on in the text: 'Милосердие – признак того, что в сердце есть жизнь, это признак благородства души'.⁹⁵ Additionally, Allah is quoted as saying, 'Милосердия лишён только гиблый человек'.⁹⁶ Due to the layout of these passages of scripture, which have been cut and pasted in montage fashion in and amongst the court testimonial documents and information about the court proceedings, it appears as if the court and judge, and by extension the Chechen and Russian states, are being asked to demonstrate mercy in relation to Titiev, as that would be the correct path of action to take. Equally, it appears as if the spectator is being asked to demonstrate mercy in relation to those that do injustice and harm to Titiev. It is also the seeming total absence of mercy in the play that becomes its pervading atmosphere. The question apparently being asked of the spectator here is whether or not they feel the capacity for mercy that is so absent in the world of the text. However, much as in *Война близко*, in the end the spectator is wrongfooted as it transpires that mercy is not being asked of the spectator or of those who persecute the worthy hero of the play. Rather it is everyone else who is unworthy of Titiev, and mercy is something that only he is worthy of granting. In this way his heroic qualities are amplified. At the conclusion of the play, his verdict on those who took part in his arrest and trial is damning: 'Мне стыдно видеть людей, которые, называя себя мусульманами, так низко пали'.⁹⁷ In asserting his

⁹⁴ *Oiub*.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*.

shame for those involved in his persecution, Titiev's moral and spiritual superiority over his persecutors emerges, in addition to his status as a tragic hero.

If all the heroes who emerge over the course of the plays demonstrate courage and 'manliness' in one way or another, there is also a running theme of 'cowardice'. In his final word in court, Sentsov proclaims, 'Главный грех на земле – это трусость'.⁹⁸ He attributes these words to Mikhail Bulgakov, although in actual fact he appears to be paraphrasing the character of Pilat in Bulgakov's famous Stalin-era novel, *Мастер и Маргарита*, who thinks to himself whilst recalling a conversation with Ieshua Ga-Notsri:

Свободного времени было столько, сколько надобно, а гроза будет только к вечеру, и трусость, несомненно, один из самых страшных пороков. Так говорил Иешуа Га-Ноцри. Нет, философ, я тебе возражаю: это самый страшный порок!⁹⁹

Sentsov's choice of Kyiv-born, Russian-speaking Bulgakov is apt – it refers both to the shared cultural history of Russia and Ukraine, and to the Stalinist repressions with which this writer and this novel are strongly associated, when the Soviet show trials were at their zenith. In *Оюб*, one of the female characters in the play makes exactly this comparison between the Stalinist terror and Kadyrov's Chechnya: 'Это как в сталинское время, никто не знает, кто что про кого скажет, и никто не гарантирован от того, что его ночью не увезут и он не исчезнет бесследно'.¹⁰⁰ The motif of cowardice reappears later, in the lawyer's monologue, where he passes his own judgement on the court proceedings: 'Я считаю, что это трусость — посылать своих подчиненных, зависящих от тебя людей, давать ложные

⁹⁸ *Voina blisko.*

⁹⁹ Mikhail Bulgakov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh*, vol. 4, ed. by V.I. Losev (St Petersburg: Azbuka, 2013), p. 456.

¹⁰⁰ *Oiub.*

показания в суде. Тем более молодых людей'.¹⁰¹ Elsewhere in his defence speech, the lawyer refers to the 'дети «Чечевицы»', which was the generation of Chechens who grew up or were born in Siberia and Central Asia after the mass deportations of the Chechen people during Operation Chechevitsa in 1944.¹⁰² This included Titiev himself, who was born in Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Titiev uses the history of the Stalinist terror in Chechnya to demonstrate the tragifarical nature of the case against him, and to locate it in a broader historical perspective:

Если кто знает нашу историю, историю чеченского народа, то ему известно, что 31 июля 1937 года за одни сутки по таким рапортам были арестованы 14 тысяч чеченцев. А всего за последующий месяц — 18 тысяч, большинство из которых были расстреляны или погибли в лагерях.¹⁰³

Titiev powerfully transposes the tragic history of his people on to the present, where the fear to speak out has returned and where show trials are once more an evident reality. Indeed, the spectator bears witness to exactly such a trial unfolding before their eyes, making this work (and also, to a lesser degree, *Война близко*) a hybridized form of the British documentary genre of the 'tribunal play'.¹⁰⁴ In a Russian context, there are also historical links to the postrevolutionary 'agitprop trials' (although these were not documentary as such), as well as to the late Soviet *glasnost*' plays of Mikhail Shatrov, such as *Дальше... дальше... дальше!* (1988).

The unrelenting descriptions of the violence of the Chechen security forces, the torture procedures in *Пытки*, and the physical and psychological violence inflicted upon the figures in *Война близко* all work to reinforce the atmosphere of

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ This was pioneered by London's Tricycle Theatre under the stewardship of Nick Kent in the 1990s and 2000s. See Victoria Brittain and others, *The Tricycle: Collected Tribunal Plays, 1994-2012* (London: Oberon Books, 2014).

terror that pervades the worlds of these plays. The disappearances in the night of the figures in the ‘Пензенское дело’, the fabrication of the cases against Sentsov and Titiev, and the sheer absurdity of the inconsistencies in the court proceedings against them – when placed in a historical context – inevitably summon up the ghosts of the Stalinist show trials.

Both Sentsov and Titiev refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of their respective court trials, believing them to be unlawful. Sentsov explains this, saying, ‘Суд оккупантов не может быть справедливым по определению’.¹⁰⁵ For Titiev, on the other hand, it is more a question of morals and faith: in testifying against him, more than sixty police officers have lied in court, which is forbidden by Islam, and all have done so in the interests of personal gain or out of fear, reasons which he does not consider justified:

Я задавался вопросом, почему люди врут. Вижу только две причины — получение выгоды и страх. Не знаю, что двигало свидетелями обвинения. В любом случае обе эти причины унижительны.¹⁰⁶

He describes the materials of the case against him as ‘макулатура’.¹⁰⁷ In condemning the legitimacy of the legal documents in the case, Titiev’s words remind the spectator that it is also documents which lie at the foundation of the play. It is the truth-value of these documents over others that the documentary text relies on for its production of authenticity. It is equally documents – and their manipulation – that are the basis of Titiev’s fabricated conviction, and that underpin the creation and enforcement of state ideological normative codes, as seen in the wave of legislation documents analysed in the introduction. In trying to make sense of High Putinist ideology, and of the

¹⁰⁵ *Voina blizko.*

¹⁰⁶ *Oiub.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

conditions that allow for the systemic abuses of power and human rights seen in the ‘torture trilogy’, Titiev’s words on the state prosecutor in his trial are to the point:

Гособвинитель Байгаева прекрасно знает, что это фабрикация. Но это ей не мешает поддерживать обвинение.¹⁰⁸

Tellingly, Titiev is not surprised by the prosecutor’s hypocrisy. Indeed, by this late stage in the play, given everything we have already heard about the case, it is very much in the order of things. Such is the political reality of Kadyrov’s Chechnya, where fabrication on all institutional levels has been normalised to such a degree that it is the norm. According to Titiev, everyone involved in the prosecution knows that it is a fabrication and yet they all cynically continue to go along with it anyway. To quote philosopher Slavoj Žižek on the ideology of cynicism, ‘they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it’.¹⁰⁹ Cynicism is a defining characteristic of the worlds that all three of these plays inhabit. Reflecting on the performative nature of the Stalinist show trials, Elizabeth Wood has argued that they emerged out of the agitprop trials staged by Bolshevik artist-activists in the early postrevolutionary years.¹¹⁰ In the light of these performative and historical connotations, the image of the show trial that persistently emerges from the works in the ‘torture trilogy’ becomes one of the leitmotifs of High Putinism, as it was of High Stalinism before it.

In *Война близко*, Sentsov has the final word, and indeed these were his final words in court prior to the verdict in his case in 2015. Given the emphasis that is placed on them by locating them at the very end, they are perhaps revealing of

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989; repr. 2008), p. 25.

¹¹⁰ See Elizabeth Wood, ‘Fiction becomes indistinguishable from reality, 1928-33’, in *Performing Justice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 193-207.

something of the intended message behind the play. In words that could have come from Gremina herself, Sentsov damningly declares:

Вы себя может, оправдываете, что детей надо кормить. Но зачем растить поколение рабов? Я хочу пожелать россиянам научиться не бояться.¹¹¹

By concluding the play in such a way, it is difficult to claim that there is any attempt to observe the ‘zero position’ in the construction of this text. Indeed, all three plays in the ‘torture trilogy’ reflect a ‘post-zero’ position in the treatment of their respective topics. The theme of the justification of immoral or illegal actions is a recurring one in all three plays, as are the themes of fear and the consequences for future generations of what is taking place in the here and now (and being documented in these plays). The damning criticism of self-serving self-justification made by Sentsov above is similarly articulated in Titiev’s ‘final word’ speech in court in Chechnya where he condemns the complicity of those involved in the fabrication of the case against him:

Те, кто фабриковал это дело, думают, что у них есть оправдание – приказ сверху. [...] Никто не обязан выполнять преступный приказ. Каждый из вас мог отказаться.¹¹²

The question of obligation versus non-obligation to carry out an immoral or illegal act if commanded to do so by superiors goes to the core not only of universal religious doctrine, but also to that of modern jurisprudence and what constitutes law as such. There are complex ethical questions here to do with complicity and responsibility for one’s actions within systemic structures of power much bigger than the individual. On the one hand, Titiev is right that it is always possible to refuse to comply, but on the

¹¹¹ *Voina blizko*

¹¹² *Oiub.*

other hand, given the reality of modern-day Chechnya and the normalised violence of the regime, one can understand the positions of the rank-and-file police officers and court judges who merely followed their orders through. According to Arendt, it is the cumulative process of all these banal acts of merely following orders that ultimately allows regimes of terror such as that which exists in Kadyrov's Chechnya to occur.¹¹³

The final word from Ugarov that brings *Пытки* to a close is of a somewhat different kind and tone to those in the other two plays. First and foremost, it is not testimony taken from a trial. Instead, it is his reaction on social media to the news of the systematic torturing of pre-trial detainees in the 'Пензенское дело'.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, it reflects the similar concerns of the theatre makers in the creation of this work. After a short passage describing the best ways to torture a person using electrocution without killing them, Ugarov concludes:

Это маленькие производственные проблемы операторов (палачей), у каждого на работе своя засада.¹¹⁵

Where Sentsov and Titiev were delivering speeches in a courtroom in which their freedom was at stake, Ugarov in his Facebook post was attempting to speak with the cool everyday language of a person who is dryly describing their daily routine, which in this case just so happens to be an FSB officer whose job it is to torture people in custody. The everyday-ness of the words uttered intensifies the horror for the spectator that they are witnessing the 'banality of evil', in which institutional violence and abuse of power by state employees, protected and legitimized by the law, is normalised to such an extent that it becomes quotidian to those who carry out these actions. For the spectator, the ordinary manner of speech masks the extraordinary

¹¹³ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

¹¹⁴ His reaction appeared in a Facebook post on 18 March 2018.

¹¹⁵ *Pytki*.

content of what is being said, which is the opposite of banal – this is an aesthetic of startling that carries with it the burden of responsibility for the victim, who is the absent other.

The devices of shock, estrangement, distancing, alienation, montage, crescendo, and wrongfooting all contribute to the aesthetic of startling that generates the ethical challenge contained in these three works of documentary theatre. The challenge is contained in the demand to accept responsibility for the absent other. This responsibility is to make the particularity of the absent other into a part of oneself, to allow oneself to be changed by the experience of being present, as a witness to the event at which the other is spoken for in their absence. None of these texts are pure verbatim in the conventional sense, but they all contain verbatim and there is no question over their status as documentary plays that generate affective truths. Consideration of the evolution of the documentary form of theatre making beyond strict adherence to verbatim methods and concepts of authenticity, reality, and objective truth will be continued in the succeeding chapters. The three plays included here, grouped together as a ‘torture trilogy’, are characterised by discourses of violence – of the physical, psychological and symbolic kind – as well as by complex forms of power and dominance in the cultural, social, and linguistic realms. In challenging dominant norms and generating alternative discourses that reject the Putinist consensus as promoted and policed by the political establishment in tandem with the legal justice system, these plays forcefully open up sites of resistance and ‘dissensus’, places where real politics can spontaneously, fleetingly emerge.

In her influential psychoanalytical theory of ‘abjection’, Julia Kristeva describes the abject as follows:

It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master.¹¹⁶

Adapting this idea, we can cast Teatr.doc as the abject and the Russian state as the master – Teatr.doc does not agree to the rules of the game laid down by the state, does not accept its normative regime in the form of the police consensus, and from its place of banishment, Teatr.doc does not cease challenging the state. In this it shares a common cause with another theatre, the Belarus Free Theatre, which has existed in exile from its native Belarus since 2011, and has increasingly taken up the causes of human rights and anti-authoritarianism in its work. Its 2016 production *Burning Doors*, starring Maria Alekhina of Pussy Riot fame, appeared in the same year as Teatr.doc's *Война близко* and partly addressed the same theme of the Sentsov case.

There is perhaps no better definition for the relationship of Teatr.doc and the Russian state in the era of High Putinism than Kristeva's notion of the abject. The abject may be 'banished' from inside the set but it continues to exist outside of it, from where it returns to challenge the master. As abjected 'others', located outside of the High Putinist police consensus and resistant to its mechanisms of co-option, the texts in the 'torture trilogy' do not agree to the rules of the game laid out by the state and enforced through censorship in all its guises. Instead, these texts collectively hold a mirror to the state, the reflection from which is a hard diagnosis of actually existing High Putinism.

¹¹⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 2.

2) Document-Based Performance: ‘New Documentarism’

In the wake of the deaths of Mikhail Ugarov and Elena Gremina in the spring of 2018, the executive director of the Meyerhold Centre, Elena Koval’skaia, dedicated that year’s Blackbox laboratory programme for up-and-coming theatre makers to the search for a ‘new documentarism’ [новая документальность] in the theatre.¹ Koval’skaia, who was a close ally of Gremina and Ugarov, believed that nearly twenty years after its emergence as a force in Russian theatre, it was time to ‘re-imagine’ [переосмыслить] the forms and practices of documentary theatre on the Russian stage.² This chapter considers three productions from two theatres that, in one way or another, and in very different ways from each other, answer Koval’skaia’s call.

Like the documentary plays that featured in the previous chapter, the three works here also contain documents at their foundation, but that is as far as the comparison goes. These three performance pieces are exactly that – performances. No productive textual analysis is possible, because although there may be documents present, these only serve as the points of departure for the works. The document here is often fragmented or its origin concealed. However, the document is always still present in its disfigurement, and this fact is testament to its generative power – whether as recorded interview, court testimonial, archival record, legal code, social media, or verbatim text. This is perhaps reflective of the importance still placed on the concrete by contemporary Russian theatre makers in a world of post-truth, disinformation, troll factories, and state-controlled media, set against a global

¹ This was stated by one of the participants in the programme, theatre maker Ada Mukhina, in an interview. See Mukhina, Unpublished interview with author, online, 2019.

² Ibid.

background of acceleration in technological developments towards total surveillance, mediatisation, and virtual reality. This chapter aims to trace the emergence of a ‘new documentarism’ in Russia, which draws on contemporary performance theory and practice, as well as developments in technology and digital culture. This can best be described as document-based performance, and can be viewed as a complementary aesthetic to the more familiar documentary modes of *Teatr.doc* discussed in the previous chapter. The emergence of document-based performance as a visible phenomenon in recent years is perhaps a continuation of what Molly Flynn has identified as certain ‘cultural anxieties’ towards the ‘evidentiary status of documents’ and forms of truth-telling in twenty-first-century Russia.³ Similar processes of divergence from traditional documentary techniques have elsewhere been described as ‘post-documentary’ or even ‘post/documentary’.⁴ I avoid using such terms here for the reason that it is unclear what more they tell us, if anything, about these works, other than that a hybridization of documentary and non-documentary forms has occurred. Carol Martin’s preferred term ‘theatre of the real’ seems a more inclusive, less loaded way of conceiving of these diverse performances.

The first work to be considered is a collaborative experimental performance called *Конституция*, created by director Sergei Morozov, choreographer Alena Papina, and composer Dmitrii Mazurov. Marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Russian Constitution, it is a highly original embodying of the text of the foundational legal document of the modern Russian state, which incorporates the spectator into the heart of the performance. Presence and ‘event-ness’ are central to the discursive

³ See Molly Flynn, *Witness Onstage: Documentary Theatre in Twenty-First-Century Russia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), p. 2.

⁴ ‘Post/documentary’ is the preferred term used by Jan-Noël Thon in his article, in order to emphasise that it is not a break with, but a continuation of the documentary genre. See Thon, ‘Post/Documentary: Referential Multimodality in “Animated Documentaries” and “Documentary Games”’, *Poetics Today*, 40 (2019), 269-97.

power of this work, but nonetheless, as is apparent from the title, the foundational material for the emergence of the event and the spectator experience is the Constitution as a document.

Second will be an analysis of a comparatively more orthodox work, but one which is still experimental by nature and far from conventional if viewed from a script-based drama perspective. *YouTube/B noлnyuu* was directed by Grigorii Dobrygin, although ‘devised by’ might be a better description for Dobrygin’s role, considering that this was a collaborative work using ensemble methods, the creation of which cannot be attributed to the director alone. In the form of a song-and-dance-based scenic montage drawn from material collected on social media platform YouTube, this work exists firmly on the intersection between documentary drama and postdramatic performance. As a work of document-based performance, it reflects an emerging, alternative documentary trend in contemporary Russian theatre.

Finally, I will examine a performance that brings together the qualities of the first two works into a politically-charged feminist critique, effectively utilising the power of both documents and postdramatic performance techniques in order to address the problems of systemic patriarchy and toxic masculinity. This work keeps the name of the original play that it takes as its point of departure – Scottish dramatist Gary McNair’s *Locker Room Talk*. Created by Ada Mukhina, Dar’ia Iuriichuk, and Ol’ga Tarakanova, it unusually featured an all-female cast and crew. This work demonstrates a document-based-performance aesthetic that captures the potential for radical theatre making in the contemporary era, and harnesses the power of the document at the core of formal experimentation.

All three of these works are documentary in essence, but do not fit the conventional paradigms of the genre. As such, they reflect an expanded field of

documentary practice. This expanded field is grounded in performance aesthetics and signifies a shift towards a ‘new documentarism’.

Конституция

Конституция was a product of the Meyerhold Centre’s highly successful annual Blackbox laboratory programme, which has been running since 2013 and in that time has become a major force in the creation of innovative and original stage works in the Russian capital (including Andrei Stadnikov’s 2019 Golden Mask-winning *Rodina*, amongst others). Premiering on the main stage of the Meyerhold Centre in September 2018, *Конституция* was conceived to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the creation and establishment of the Constitution of the Russian Federation as the foundational document of the state, which had occurred exactly two years to the day (12 December) after the ratification of the Belavezha Accords that brought about the end of the Soviet Union in all but name. The Russian Constitution, which existed unchanged for twenty seven years until the 2020 reforms, has its own peculiar back-story, having been written and passed into law during the political crisis of 1993. This is a year best remembered for the extraordinary images of the building of the Russian parliament, the so-called White House, charred and damaged by tank fire after the standoff between the executive and the legislature turned violent (187 people were killed in the conflict). The Constitution was thus specifically identified with President Boris El’tsin, in that it concentrated an unusual amount of power in the hands of the executive, to be used as a way out of the political deadlock at the time, whilst also shoring up the unpopular neoliberal reform programme of the government.

As history has shown, these powers then became the tool of El'tsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, in establishing the 'patronage network' pyramidal system of vertical power that we see in place today.⁵

Besides this, there are a number of more general humanitarian points in the Constitution that make it an important document for recalling the political ideals of the time and the extent to which the ruling elite have deviated from them over the ensuing quarter-century. These refer to things such as the freedom for all citizens from torture, freedom of public assembly, freedom of speech and religion – all things that have been increasingly curtailed and violated in recent years. The need to reform the Constitution to rebalance the separation of powers is real and has not been addressed by the pseudo-reforms carried out in 2020, which only served to reinforce the conservative-reactionary agenda of the Putin regime and acted as a cover for the real motive behind the reforms, which was the annulment of Putin's previous presidential terms, allowing him to stay in power until 2036. Of much greater need, and unfortunately of much lower priority to the current regime, was respect for and upholding of the Constitution's original content relating to civil liberties. The quarter-century anniversary of the Constitution in 2018, like the centenary of the October Revolution in the previous year, was passed over in silence by the authorities. Indeed, in another example of financial censorship, approaches made by the Meyerhold Centre to the Moscow City Department of Culture regarding monetary support in the form of a public grant for the project were roundly ignored. In the light of the 2020 reforms, it became clear why – the Constitution was a taboo topic and attention to its content was considered undesirable, perhaps in anticipation of the political stunt to

⁵ See, for example, Nikolai Petrov, 'Putin's Neo-Nomenklatura System and its Evolution' in *Stubborn Structures: Reconceptualizing Post-Communist Regimes*, ed. by Bálint Magyar (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2019), pp. 179-215.

come less than two years later. There is a point to be made here about the marking of an important political event through the simple act of drawing attention to its existence in a theatrical performance, when otherwise no official attempts on the state or local level were initiated.

As with all the works in this chapter, there is no text as such to draw from, so I will give a brief overview of the performance and describe its key features.⁶ Of value here is the description of the production offered to spectators on the Meyerhold Centre website, which gives important indicators as to the creators' intentions, as well as to the way that they wished it to be perceived by prospective spectators. It also gives us some idea of the expectations that spectators would have had prior to the performance, having only read the description online and in the absence of other information (the production was not widely reviewed or reported on):

О Конституции принято думать как о главном законе, но о ней редко думают как о тексте. Перформанс «Конституция» — попытка взглянуть на основополагающий документ России беспристрастным взглядом переводчика и прочитать его всеми возможными способами. Основной среди них — перевод Конституции на жестовый язык в графическую партитуру с помощью датчика акселерометра. Перформеры следуют этой партитуре, транслируя текст не только голосом, но и телом. Оптика и способы входа в текст меняются от главы к главе: от аскетичного чтения с пюпитров до хеппенинга с участием зрителей.⁷

This description was also included in the programme (a single folded A4 sheet of paper, as is customary at the Meyerhold Centre), which was available in the foyer and distributed to ticket holders before admittance to the performance space. The choice

⁶ This is based on my own experience of viewing the performance at the Meyerhold Centre in Moscow on a research trip in the spring of 2019. It also draws from an interview I conducted with the choreographer, Alena Papina, as well as additional materials available online.

⁷ See Meyerhold Centre website, <<http://meyerhold.ru/konstituciya-work-in-progress/>> [accessed 23 December 2020]. The 'work-in-progress' that appears in the url address seems to be a leftover from the Blackbox laboratory performance, after which the website page was not updated, rather than indicating that the work was never considered completed.

of the words ‘performance space’ here, rather than ‘auditorium’ or ‘stage’, is intentional, because although the performance ostensibly took place on the theatre’s Main Stage, the space was stripped out and reconfigured to such an extent that it became a vast empty black-box chamber, no longer resembling a conventional theatre interior with clear-cut division between performer and spectator. The Russian language has an advantage in this respect of calling a theatre’s various stages ‘залы’, which creates no issue with applicability in a contemporary performance context as exists in the English language with the word ‘stage’. There was no stage as such, no raised levels, and no designated auditorium for the audience. Instead, the audience sat on the floor around the edge of the space, on bean bags and cushions. A few chairs were scattered along three walls of the quadrangular space for those that needed them. The fourth wall was occupied by an almost floor-to-ceiling projector screen. By utilising every inch of available floor space, up to the toes of the spectators lining the perimeter of the room, the performance acquired an expansiveness that could only be surpassed by open-air or site-specific work. This sense of scale seemed to reflect the challenge of not only representing, but embodying the foundational document of the modern-day Russian state. In terms of props, the space that the performers inhabited (which was the entire space besides the one metre or so around the perimeter where the spectators sat) contained a few lecterns scattered around, with microphone stands and loudspeakers accompanying them, and nothing more. The only other notable feature in the room was a drum kit and music equipment located up on the balcony that runs around the upper level of the space of the Main Stage at the Meyerhold Centre. This, as would become clear, was for the musicians who provided a live accompaniment to each performance.

From the description on the website quoted above, the spectator knows in advance to expect a reading of the Constitution as a text, which is to say, a reading that draws attention to its textual qualities as well as to its content and form. They are further led to believe that this reading will be carried out in a postdramatic, documentary style – ‘беспристрастным взглядом переводчика’ – and as such we can expect something like a neutral transmission of the text, perhaps akin to the aforementioned ‘zero position’ pioneered at Teatr.doc. We are also told that the ‘перевод’ of the Constitution will utilise sign language and an accelerometer to generate a graphic score, which will be reinterpreted by the performers through their voices and bodies. The final piece of information that the prospective spectator receives is that there will be an immersive element to the show, with their involvement in a ‘хеппенинг’ (the use of the cyrillicised Anglo-American term ‘happening’ grounds the production in international theatre and performance discourse). In this way, the spectator is forewarned and thus forearmed that this is a participatory performance and that they will be encouraged to take part in some way, not only to spectate from the sidelines (although they can always decline to participate).

The performance was comprised of three distinct phases, and the transitions from one to the next were evolutionary, seamless progressions, rather than being broken up by scene changes or intervals, as is the convention in dramatic theatre. The only discernible break markers in the otherwise continuous gradual swelling of the affective intensity of the performance came from the chapter headings in the text of the Constitution itself. The presence of these breaks created micro-pauses for the audience’s senses to process and catch up with the information being presented. With a running time of two and a half hours, and in the absence of an interval, these moments did not go unappreciated. The first phase of the performance dealt with

approximately the first third of the Constitution, which is the most general part, relating to fundamental federal-wide laws and rights such as the aforementioned freedoms of assembly, speech, and religion, as well as freedom from torture. This phase was perhaps the most striking in its sheer novelty. As referred to in the production's description but without being elaborated on, the makers of *Конституция* employed an accelerometer, which is a device for measuring and recording movement and is now commonly used in smartphones and games consoles for this purpose. This device was strapped to the arm of a sign-language interpreter, who was translating the text of the Constitution in real time into Russian sign language whilst it was being read out initially by the performers, and later on by spectators as well. The subtle changes in motion of the interpreter's movements were thus translated into live-feed velocity charts and projected on to the large screen covering the rear wall of the space. The translation appeared as graphs with sharp peaks and troughs, and this livestream of simple data was then simultaneously watched and re-translated in real time into a somatic-kinetic language of gesture and movement by the eighteen performers. All the performers wore identical black outfits – t-shirt and loose tracksuit, both with the single word 'каждый' imprinted in bold white letters on front and side. The image of thirty six iterations of the word 'каждый' moving around the space drew out the fact that the Constitution exists for each and every citizen of the state, and every citizen is theoretically equally subject to its content, even if this is hardly the case in practice. As such, the use of the word 'каждый' on the performers' clothing brought attention to the universality of the Constitution and its invisible presence, violated or not, in the lives of every citizen. An attempt is made to embody this through the choreography, which, as Papina

makes clear, is designed to extend from the abstract to the quotidian language of everyday gesture:

У перформеров была задача танцевать его сначала, как если бы они были механистичными машинками, и с каждым жестом они все больше переходили в бытовые жесты, обычные человеческие жесты, как почёсывание головы или какой-то интерес к маникюру, очищение одежды, такие вещи. Но это все было построено на ритмике чтеца, то, как он читал.⁸

The everyday is emphasised here in Papina's description of the kinds of gestures that the performers were encouraged to draw from in their improvisations – scratching their heads, doing manicures, or cleaning clothes. Papina describes her approach to choreography as horizontal rather than vertical, and focused on the democratization of the human body, which is to say, her aesthetic is 'anti-virtuosic'. She describes virtuosity in language reminiscent of Mikhail Ugarov and his theorizations of contemporary theatre: 'Я не очень верю в виртуозность в демократическом обществе. Виртуозность – это опять какая-то иерархия'.⁹ Following from this, it is clear why the performers focus on translating and embodying the text of the Constitution in the language of everyday gesture.

Such an approach is also necessary for participatory theatre, as it enables the spectator to be drawn into the performance and included in the situational event as it plays out in real time. However, these collections of everyday gestures are all built around the vocalization of the text itself. Although every element of the performance is connected to and dependent on others for its activation, ultimately everything develops from the transmission of the text, primarily through the simple act of reading the Constitution aloud from start to finish. In this regard, however grounded in

⁸ Alena Papina, Unpublished interview with author, Moscow, 2019.

⁹ Ibid.

performance practices *Конституция* may seem at first glance, there is an employment of the Ugarovian documentary device of the uninflected ‘zero position’ in the reading of the text, in which both reader and listener-spectator serve as witnesses to the act. This is significant for consideration of the place of the document in contemporary performance theatre, but it is also useful for locating the spectator in the process of communication and emotional-affective exchange.

The second phase of the performance focused on the middle section of the Constitution, which addresses the federal composition and hierarchical power structure of the Russian state. Each federal constituent has its own gesture in Russian sign language – for example St Petersburg is an eagle, Dagestan is a ‘паныха’ traditional hat – and every time a republic or other federal administrative region (область, край, etc) was mentioned during the reading out of the text, the corresponding sign gesture for that region would be acted out. In addition to this, the performers spent some time going around the perimeter of the space and teaching the gestures to spectators on an individual or group basis. Spectators were then encouraged to repeat the sign gesture every time the corresponding word was heard thereafter. If in the first phase the audience were passive observers on the sidelines, then this was the first step in the gradual integration of the spectators into the performance. This passage of text is succeeded by one that addresses the powers and function of the president, and for convenience of reading, it contains many abbreviations of the positions of power in the constitutional hierarchy. This creates acronyms that are not designed to be spoken aloud, which presented a pronunciation problem for the performers. The solution that the creative team conceived was to employ artificial intelligence – specifically Apple’s iOS personal assistant Siri – to read all the clauses that related directly to the president, creating often nonsensical

sounds that poked gentle fun at the Russian, and indeed Soviet, habit of abbreviating titles and names, ‘как у Булгакова’.¹⁰

As and when the performers heard one of these acronyms pronounced by Siri, they would all simultaneously mimic the robotic pronunciation and shout it out loud, whilst continuing to move around and keep the viewer’s attention. The purpose of this, Papina states, was to create a ‘linguistic sculpture’ of polyphonic sound and voice:

Перформеры кричали этот текст, ругались этими словами. Они стояли в центре зала, и их задача была, пока Siri читает текст, услышать «Президент Российской Федерации» и, условно, выругаться этими словами, типа ПРФ. Вот. И это создавало такую полифонию. Зрители слышали с разных сторон, и это было языковой скульптурой.¹¹

Here Papina makes clear that the intention was to utter these acronyms as if they were curses, which adds additional nuance to the way that they might be perceived by the audience, reacting to the officialese of legal documents such as this one. Thus whilst the reading of the text occupied a neutral ‘zero position’, the response by the performers to the text was not necessarily so. The idea of creating a polyphonic sound sculpture to complement the evolving somatic landscape of the performance is clearly important. As was made clear from the online description and also repeatedly by Papina in our interview, the Constitution was to be translated and incorporated by performers and spectators alike, using both body and voice.

Following this scene, spectators were invited to come to the lectern and take it in turns to read the clauses of the chapter relating to the Parliament of the Russian Federation. Meanwhile, the performers resumed their work of interpreting and

¹⁰ Papina appears to be referring here to Mikhail Bulgakov’s parody of Soviet acronyms in his short story ‘Собачье сердце’ (1925).

¹¹ Papina.

translating the uttered text into the language of the body, specifically that of everyday gesture – quite a challenge when the content is the legal function of the state parliament, although as Papina says, this was based more on the intonation and rhythm of the voice rather than on the content of what was being said.

The final phase of the performance involved drawing the spectators further in to the action, to the point of active free participation. This was built around one of the last chapters of the Constitution, entitled ‘Судебная власть’. Given the theme, the creators decided to present this section of the text as a court trial, albeit in a somewhat abstracted form. The performers took it in turns to whisper the text to the sign language interpreter, who took on the role of the judge, whilst the other performers coaxed as many spectators as were willing into the centre of the space and used them as props for their increasingly elaborate multi-person interpretive dance sequences. In what from a viewer’s perspective had turned into a spectacle somewhere between Japanese buhtoh and a game of Twister, the intensity of the motion continued to increase, lending the court room scene a certain ambiguity of interpretation (this was perhaps also due to the absence of props and it not being necessarily apparent to every viewer what was happening). To quote Papina on this scene:

Для зрителей это была несколько нервная ситуация, потому что они оказывались в центре зала, и по сути они находились на судилище, и между ними были эти люди, которые катаются у них под ногами. Это очень двоякая история, как будто и тебя судят, и ты сам судишь вот этих вот существ, которые катаются у тебя под ногами.¹²

The point here is that the now active spectator, who has become a participant in the action, is both judging and being judged. The same can be said of participatory performance theatre in general. There is an element of the unknown and risk that

¹² Papina.

theatre makers, performers, and spectators alike engage in with this form of theatre. In the words of theatre maker Boris Bakal, this is the ‘high-risk dramaturgy’ of experimental participatory performance.¹³ It so happens that the framing of the ‘show trial’ [судилище] in the context of the Russian Constitution was the perfect vehicle for representing the centrality of this two-way judgement in performance – both judging and being judged – because of the way that it brings together the performativity of the court trial, the law, and the state apparatus on the one hand, and the performance aesthetics of contemporary non-dramatic theatre on the other hand.

The court scene then transitioned into a ‘rave’ in the middle of the space, with as many spectators as could be enlisted from the sidelines brought into the middle (which in the performance I saw was certainly the majority). This was with the intention of banishing the symbolic violence of judicial power and replacing it with a more human, more personal affective space that would conclude the performance on a positive note. Once the chaotic free-form communal dance ended, in a final gesture of humanity and interpersonal connection, the performers went around the spectators reading sections of verbatim text collected from ordinary people on the street. These touched on the most banal, everyday concerns of citizens in the present day, symbolically linking the past and the present in the marking of the quarter-century anniversary of the passing of the Constitution. This use of pure verbatim at the very end of the performance, almost after it had already ended, as a kind of postscript, presented a sharp contrast between the highly rhetorical, utopian language of the Constitution and the quotidian language of real speech addressing everyday concerns. These included, for example, how a citizen is afraid that he will not be able to pay rent for his flat that month, and how a schoolgirl felt uncomfortable in her school

¹³ Boris Bakal, quoted in Duška Radosavljević, *Theatre-Making: Interplay Between Text and Performance in the 21st Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 179.

uniform. This final moment addresses the question that until then had been left unspoken – what use is the Constitution to today’s citizens, or indeed what relevance does it have to the everyday problems of real life? The utopian ideals contained in the Constitution did not materialise after it was written, and remained unrealised twenty five years later, so what was the status of this document in people’s lives? Is it an inherently unattainable utopia and therefore meaningless empty posturing, or does it continue to serve as an important ideological marker that is worth striving for? These are the questions that *Конституция* posed, opening up a topic that perhaps for some had not previously existed or had otherwise gone unnoticed.

Although the text of the Constitution was read out in its entirety, it was not always discernible to the ear of the spectator, as in the moments described above in which the performers shouted out acronyms over the top of the reader and equally when they took it in turns to whisper the text to the sign language interpreter. As such, we should understand the function of the text as creating an affective space in which it can be interpreted and translated to the spectator in the language of somatic gesture and polyphonic vocal soundscape, and where the interaction of these two elements is a generative experience for the spectator. The text, therefore, becomes de-centred, functioning as the material base for the performance, but being secondary or subsidiary to it. The performance primarily generates its discourse through other non-textual means. This is perhaps the crucial difference between document-based performance and documentary theatre – in the former the text is marginalised and secondary to the performance-event, whereas in the latter the text always remains central, even if the epistemological validity of the document itself is in doubt or under interrogation. The relegation of the text to the level of prop creates problems for spectators unaccustomed to this kind of theatre, and this proved to be the case for

Конституция. Papina describes complaints received from viewers who felt that the text had been devalued and lost in the performance, but as she also points out, this is an artistic interpretation, not a public reading.¹⁴ This is in stark contrast to *Teatr.doc*, where respect for the text remains paramount. The two questions that arise here – relating to the spectator and to the treatment of documents – are central concerns for all three productions considered in this chapter, as well as for the thesis as a whole, as they map the inter-relationship of text and performance in contemporary Russian theatre. There was very little written about this production in the media, not even on the usual specialist theatre- and arts-focused platforms, and many spectators walked out before the end (the long running time and lack of perceptible plot probably to blame for this). Most unfortunately, this epic-scale production that was exemplary of the possibilities for hybridised aesthetics in contemporary performance theatre in Russia was only performed a handful of times in late 2018 and early 2019, before being dropped from the theatre’s repertoire. This was in spite of it winning the coveted Blackbox residency programme and taking one year of preparation to bring to fruition, not to mention all of the theatre’s own limited resources that went into it, due to the lack of external funding from public grants.

To conclude, a brief word on the politics of *Конституция*. There is a discernible tendency in the work towards an aesthetics of the mass form in opposition to the individual. However, whilst the mass form may at first seem de-humanising – as the discrete identity of the individual gets lost in the indiscriminate, faceless mass – through the process of performance the mass comes to represent an emancipatory politics at precisely the level of the individual. On the one hand there is the tyranny of

¹⁴ ‘По факту, то, что мы делали в тексте, это тоже обесценивание. Многие жаловались, что вы там забубнили какие-то главы, их вообще непонятно и не слышно, но это же художественное произведение.’ Papina.

the court scene: spectators atomized and alienated from both the audible sound of the reading of the text and the action of the performers, who exclude the spectators from their interpretative dance sequences. On the other hand there is the free-form group 'rave' that the court room scene gives way to. The effacement that inevitably stems from the collective mass of bodies is thus framed as an emancipation of sorts, where each performer represents 'каждый', in a discourse of communitarian collective individuality over individualism. In the age of global 'surveillance capitalism' – the erosion of personal privacy and civil liberties caused by 'big tech' on the one side and state security services on the other – and in the context of the recent roll-out of Chinese-built face recognition technology in the Russian capital by Mayor Sobianin, the empowerment of individual effacement takes on ever greater meaning and political significance as an act of resistance.¹⁵ In this regard, the final moment where short verbatim texts of ordinary citizens' concerns are recited quietly on a one-to-one basis between performer and spectator functions as a re-individualizing of the collective body within a new political ecology of everyday humanism, free from hierarchical power and surveillance. Papina described the ending of the performance as such: 'Такое переприсвоение механистического текста в такую очень повседневную, документальную очень историю, свою жизнь'.¹⁶ This idea of the re-appropriation of one's life from the mechanistic world of state power and the law through democratization in performance reflects a theatre firmly engaged in the politics of aesthetics. In *Конституция*, it is the intersection of the universal form of the collective mass with the particular form of the verbatim testimony that generates its emancipatory political discourse. Textual documents can be seen to perform a

¹⁵ 'Surveillance capitalism' is Shoshana Zuboff's term. See Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

¹⁶ Papina.

number of different functions in this work, ranging from problematized oppressor, to democratic humanizer. Whether de-centred, silenced, shouted over, whispered or banished, documents were nonetheless present throughout. This is representative of a ‘new documentarism’ in Russia, one that draws from an expanded field of ensemble performance practices in its treatment of documents. The consideration of two more productions in this chapter will reflect on other ways that documents are used in contemporary performance theatre in Russia, and how they complement what we have seen in this work.

YouTube/В полиции

Resembling a kind of postmodern, multimediatized variety theatre performance, *YouTube/В полиции* is reminiscent of the scenic montage aesthetic of Vsevolod Meierkhol’d and the early Soviet avant-garde (the similarities being a reminder of the contingency of the term ‘postdramatic’, with its implication of following after ‘drama’ in temporal terms). The production began life as an actor training exercise at Oleg Kudriashov’s GITIS Master’s programme, on a course led by actor-director Grigorii Dobrygin, who himself studied under Kudriashov on both the actor’s and director’s programmes and is well-known in his own right as a film actor. According to Dobrygin, one of Kudriashov’s exercises at GITIS is ‘people watching’ [наблюдение за людьми].¹⁷ Wishing to approach the task differently, the students on his course collectively decided to gather materials for the exercise not

¹⁷ Grigorii Dobrygin, quoted in an interview with Iaroslav Zabaluev. See Zabaluev, ‘Glavnyi geroi – eto otdelenie politsii: Grigorii Dobrygin rasskazal o svoem spektakle “YouTube/V politsii”’, *Gazeta.ru*, 2 December 2016 <https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2016/12/02/a_10395623.shtml> [accessed 23 December 2020].

from real life but instead from the social media platform YouTube. In this, the student-actors reflected the millennial generation's perception of the world, which now exists as much in the virtual-digital space as it does in non-mediated reality. As Dobrygin observed, 'Мы меньше смотрим по сторонам и больше в экран телефона'.¹⁸ In this regard, the production that emerged out of the actor training exercise at GITIS is responding to the zeitgeist, and to the changes in the way that younger generations perceive the world around them. The fact that we now look more into the screens of our smartphones than at our surroundings in everyday life has fundamentally shifted the way that we observe others – a large part of our common habit of people watching is now done online, in the vast digital realms of social media, including Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok and YouTube, the latter of which is a platform for live and recorded video performance, playback, dissemination and commentary. Of most significance here is YouTube's archival quality – everything from high art to the previously ephemeral everyday banal is uploaded and stored on its servers indefinitely. Dobrygin described the process of gathering materials as such:

Лет пять назад, когда я учился на режиссера у Олега Львовича Кудряшова, у нас с однокурсниками была идея сделать спектакль про персонажей из YouTube. Мы проводили вечера и ночи, показывая друг другу удивительные ролики. Причем речь не о видеоблогерах, а именно об обычных людях — сложных, болезненных, раненых. В принципе, это и есть предмет изучения нашего спектакля — какая-то раненость.¹⁹

The idea of creating a study of ordinary people, with all their defects and flaws, is nothing new to twenty-first-century Russian theatre, where Teatr.doc has been doing exactly that since 2002, but what is significant about this production is the approach that it takes to the interpretation and subsequent re-presentation of the scenes of

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

everyday life found on the video sharing site. This is where it diverges from the Teatr.doc mode of documentary theatre as explored in the previous chapter. As Dobrygin's words above make clear, the materials the students collected were not conscious performances uploaded by video bloggers or professionals, they were chance recordings of moments from everyday life. This is not to say that the people featured in the clips were necessarily unaware that they were being filmed. The key point is that they were non-professionals whose actions were not commercially-driven or scripted. In this sense they are representative of life in its new digitally-mediated performative mode.

As a digital archive of the everyday, YouTube is overwhelming in its vastness, so for the purposes of creating a coherent performance using material found on the video-sharing platform, the creators needed a theme. That theme became the police station. The performance is spatially oriented, with a scenic construction that is closer to the variety show than to the drama. As to how this particular social setting became the focal point, Dobrygin explained:

Во-первых, когда ребята показывали свои этюды, я предлагал им место действия для импровизации, и самым точным оказался обезьянник. Персонажи слились с этим пространством. А во-вторых, полицейские вообще много снимают — они глумятся или фиксируют какие-то эпизоды своих будней, большое количество материала попадает в сеть из их рук.²⁰

The detention cell – or 'обезьянник' as it is colloquially known – features here (and will reappear in the next chapter in relation to Dmitrii Danilov's *Человек из Подольска*) as a generative space for social observation in contemporary Russian theatre. The whole production owes its existence to the police force itself, whose employees record videos from their working life and subsequently a small portion of

²⁰ Ibid.

these are leaked on to YouTube. The creators' debt to the police for this wealth of material is one of the ironies that gives this production its contextual richness.

In a production that is not linear, does not have recurring or named characters, and contains no discernible plot as such, but yet remains definitively theatre, the twentieth-century Soviet avant-garde concept of 'montage' is useful for considering how non-dramatic theatre functions without the usual support structure that is characteristic of the drama (plot, character development, dialogue, etc.). Montage relies on the impression created for the spectator by the individual scene and by its combination with others, which cumulatively create 'the image of the theme', as filmmaker and montage theorist Sergei Eizenshtein called it.²¹ Theatre scholar Jonathan Pitches summarizes the effects that a montage aesthetic had in Meierkhol'd's theatre as follows:

An episodic structure works against the incremental progression of Naturalism. It therefore supports all manner of *stylization*. Montage is intrinsically *musical*: the arrangement of the overall production can be likened to a composition. [...] The collisions of ideas generated by montage naturally lead to the mixing of opposites and hence to the *grotesque*. And the montage itself is facilitated by the view of character as inconsistent or fluid, the result one might say of multiple *masks* in performance.²²

Episodic structure, stylization, musical composition, the grotesque, inconsistent and fluid characters – these attributes of the montage aesthetic are all applicable descriptions of Dobrygin's production, with the addition of multimedia technology (TV monitors, speaker systems) that also becomes an actor in the performance.

According to Dobrygin, the lead actor of the show is not a person but in fact the

²¹ Sergei Eizenshtein, *The Film Sense*, trans. by Jay Leyda (London: Faber & Faber, 1943; repr. 1986), p. 59.

²² Jonathan Pitches, *Vsevolod Meyerhold* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 75. Italics in original.

police station.²³ When the main character of a performance, upon which the entire work hangs, is a non-human inanimate spatial setting, we are clearly in a form of theatre that cannot be called ‘drama’ and must be approached from a different perspective. In its irreverent re-presentation of documents (in this case video clips found online) in a variety-style montage sequence, *YouTube/В полиции* reflects an expanded, hybridised field of documentary practice, grounded in performance aesthetics.

After being staged at GITIS, *YouTube/В полиции* subsequently transferred to Teatr Praktika, where Oleg Kudriashov’s theatre studio has a residency. It premiered in December 2016 in the theatre’s Малый зал. With a running time of just over an hour, it conforms to the norm of ‘Новая драма’, where around an hour is customary, especially for documentary plays. The description provided on the website is laconic, to say the least:

Спектакль в жанре found drama Мастерской Олега Кудряшова, в основе которого — ролики из YouTube.²⁴

Dobrygin states that the creators of the performance invented the term ‘found drama’ themselves. Putting aside the issue of genre, what this choice of terminology usefully reflects is the origin of the materials for the scenes. These are described as ‘found’, which emphasises the documentary origins of the production and the presence of the document (broadly conceived to include video) behind the performance, as well as highlighting the element of chance involved in the selection of materials. The document in this sense is the referent, as the performers’ actions refer out to the

²³ “‘Главный герой’ — это отделение полиции”. Dobrygin, in Zabaluev.

²⁴ This appeared on the production’s website page, which was still active on the Teatr Praktika website even after the work was removed from the repertoire in 2019, but has since been taken down.

original source material, whilst their actions also exist independently, grounded in the present moment of the event. In contrast to documentary plays where the text is central, documents in these kinds of performances are de-centred, functioning more as the base material upon which scenic action is built. Dobrygin said in this regard:

Мы отталкиваемся от этих роликов, трансформируем их. Допустим, если герой под бутиратом, то в спектакле он... просто очень взволнован и крайне удивлен — мы ищем сценический эквивалент.²⁵

The approach outlined here has strong echoes of that expressed by Alena Papina in regards to the making of *Конституция* and to her approach towards choreography (see above). Taking the document as the point of origin (be that YouTube video or legal code), and transforming it into the language of performance, these two productions operate in a common discursive space, even though they are aesthetically very different. Dobrygin's reference here to the search for 'scenic equivalents' recalls the description of Meierkhol'dian montage by Pitches above. These 'scenic equivalents' were combined with each other in a montage effect to create the Eizenshtein-ian 'image of the theme'.

Occupying the space between documentary and performance, document-based performance generates a new language of theatre that is derived from both forms and their respective realms of discourse. Dobrygin claims that nowadays, 'У нас у всех сейчас «ленточное» мышление благодаря социальным сетям'.²⁶ This alleged short attention span of the first digital generation is reflected in the structure of the work, which is fragmentary and plotless. In spite of this, however, there is a theme that emerges from the work as a whole – the black-comedy absurd world of the Russian police station. A description of three scenes will give a clearer idea of the

²⁵ Dobrygin, in Zabaluev.

²⁶ Ibid.

‘image of the theme’ that emerges. This includes a song, a dance routine, and the finale. Together these episodes reflect the ‘variety’ nature of the production, which is a composition of different numbers that are only tangentially connected, by the theme of the police station. The song and the dance routine are separately available to watch on YouTube, recorded and uploaded unofficially by spectators from their camera phones (something that the audience is asked not to do, but judging by the number of smartphones being held up around the auditorium that are easily visible in these two clips, the capital’s theatre-goers have few qualms about ignoring this request).²⁷ There is a certain irony in these clips that are themselves derived from YouTube videos being uploaded back on to the same platform and watched again by the public as new archival documents. That said, however, the iterative quality of such material and of the YouTube archive more broadly is a defining feature of social media and ‘meme’ culture. The finale is not available online, so it will be recounted from memory, as a subjective account of the impression made on a spectator.

Starting with the song, this illicit video recording from one of the performances of the show was uploaded to YouTube in May 2018, has a running time of one minute thirty eight seconds, and at the time of writing has been viewed around five hundred times. By YouTube standards, this is very few. As a point of comparison, the original version of the song that is sung in the clip – Konstantin Stupin’s *Пушистый хвост лисицы* – has been viewed over 4.2 million times, albeit over a longer time period (the video was posted in 2014).²⁸ The clip from *YouTube/B полиция* that features this song sees a policeman – in full blue uniform, including hat

²⁷ The song and the dance clips can be found respectively at: Olga Troshchenko, “*Youtube/ v politsii*”, *pesnia*, online video recording, YouTube, 1 May 2018, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4RTT3HbjF8>> [accessed 23 December 2020]; Troshchenko, “*Youtube/ v politsii*”, *tanets*, online video recording, YouTube, 1 May 2018, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qx8NLqQBODs>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

²⁸ Konstantin Stupin, *Bushy tail Fox*, online video recording, YouTube, 29 April 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJA_2CTNjFA> [accessed 23 December 2020].

and tie – reclining in a chair and strumming coarsely on an acoustic guitar whilst knocking his head back, one eye shut, and singing in a gruff, gravelly voice about the travails of a life hard lived. For those not familiar with Stupin, he is a cult hero of underground post-Soviet rock music, as famous for his battles with heroin addiction, petty crime, and many years spent in prison, as he is for his ‘блатной’ musical style and irreverent, expletive-laden lyrics. The image of the policeman, therefore, brazenly growling out a Stupin song, is a strong juxtaposition, the irony of which was not lost on the audience, who laughed their approval. The connection of the police force to the underground criminal world is not an uncommon cultural trope in post-Soviet Russia, it has to be said. In this regard, the Stupin-singing policeman does not so much surprise anyone in the audience, as it does reinforce cultural assumptions and provide ironic amusement for the spectator. It is as much a moment of cultural intertextuality as it is social commentary. Actor Igor Kuznetsov’s rendition of the song is almost virtuosic, which adds to the variety-show feel of the occasion. This gig scene is not connected to any other scene *per se*, and in referring out to a well-known musician in Stupin, it is self-sustaining (hence why it makes for a good online clip). However, it also exists as a part of the whole – it is a component of the total scenic affect generated by the performance, which means considering it in aggregate with other scenes.

Part of what made the dance scene that found its way on to YouTube so memorable was its striking title – ‘Как бороться с гопниками’. Whether this was the title of an actual YouTube clip involving real police officers or not is unclear. Whatever the original source material was, it is transformed by the GITIS students into a high-camp dance routine, which is evidently drawn from the actions and movements of physical-combat training. These inherently violent actions are queered

in the process of transformation to a scenic equivalent. The dance routine is performed to a backing track of a hit pop song by post-Soviet *estrada* star Stas Kostiuskin (famous as one half of group Чай вдвоем) called ‘Женщина, я не танцую’ (2014). In her influential 1964 essay ‘On Camp’, Susan Sontag claims that ‘pure camp is always naïve’, and that the essential element of pure camp is ‘a seriousness that fails’.²⁹ A viewing of the music video for Kostiuskin’s song would testify to the high (or ‘pure’) campness of his *estrada* style, and no small element of this is transferred on to the routine of the performers in this scene.³⁰ The actors are all dressed in the distinctive two-tone blue uniform of the Russian police force, with accompanying star-encrusted service hat and ‘погоны’.³¹ When the all-male dance troupe in *YouTube/В полиции* campily feign to slap and kick an imaginary ‘гопник’ combatant in sync with Kostiuskin’s music whilst dressed in police uniform, the playfulness of the scene is underlined by its camp aesthetic and by the interweaving of ironic cultural references with the reality of police violence. The ‘гопник’ is the imaginary target in this instance, but given the notoriously indiscriminate use of violence by the Russian police force in recent years, there is an easy slippage here between social groups, with the гопник, football fan, and peaceful protester existing on a short continuum.

Underlying the immediate humour of this high-camp dance routine is institutionalised police violence and its indiscriminate application. These institutions of power and law enforcement are partly queered through the scenic transformation into the language of theatre. Following the passing of one of the most recent

²⁹ Susan Sontag, ‘On Camp’, in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), pp. 275-92 (pp. 282-83).

³⁰ The music video can be found here: Alexander Igudin, *A-Dessa “Zhenshchina, ia ne tantsuiu”*, online video recording, YouTube, 20 September 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9iE8b8jh2A>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

³¹ This lends the performance a striking resemblance to the striptease routine from the 1997 British cult film *The Full Monty*, which was also notable for its (albeit knowing) campness.

censorship laws, that forbidding the ill-defined concept of ‘disrespect to authority’, which came into law in March 2019, the inappropriate wearing of official service uniforms has essentially been criminalised. There have been a number of incidents of actors getting into trouble as a result of negative portrayals of figures of so-called ‘authority’, such as the case of actor Dmitrii Smolev being arrested and held in custody for more than a week for a YouTube video in which he was dressed as a police sergeant and pretended to be drunk.³² With this most recent legislative development, *YouTube/B полиция* was forcibly relocated to within the grey area of legal uncertainty some time after its premiere in 2016, thus acquiring additional, contextual subversiveness as a result. The fact that the show was dropped from the theatre’s repertoire at around the same time as this incident perhaps reflected the new atmosphere of self-censorship in the cultural sphere.

The final scene of the show differs from all the others in that the actors are not the focus, the TV monitors are. All attention turns to the two screens positioned on the walls that up to that point have been used as secondary props to display the scene headings, as they were for the dance routine described above. For the finale, however, a video clip retrieved from YouTube is shown on the screens in the original as a video, without being translated into a scenic equivalent. According to Sontag, the ‘ultimate camp statement’ is ‘it’s good because it’s awful’.³³ This statement seems to apply to the clip found by the creators of *YouTube/B полиция* and used for the show’s finale. It was so perfect in its absurdity that it had to be shown in full on screens rather than acted out. The background context to this clip is the Western sanctions imposed on Russia after the events of 2014 and the subsequent ‘counter-sanctions’ by Russia

³² ProRU News Channel, *Akter sygral p’ianogo politseiskogo i poluchil 8 sutok aresta*, online video recording, YouTube, 1 August 2019, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQkc1pGvDCw>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

³³ Sontag, p. 292.

that placed restrictions on imports of certain food products, predominantly from the European Union. In the wake of the so-called ‘counter-sanctions’, it became known that Russian border patrols were seizing newly contraband goods and destroying them. In this clip, police officers show to the camera that they are in possession of an E.U. chicken and resolve to destroy the ‘запрещенка’. They do this by placing the small chicken carcass on the ground in the path of a huge old Soviet tractor, and proceed to drive the tractor back and forth over the dead animal whilst the other officers stand nearby, observing proceedings as witnesses, until the job is deemed done. The sheer size of the tractor in contrast to the tiny packed chicken gives this real-life scene a strong element of the grotesque. Too unbelievable to not be shown in the original, the actors in their police uniforms stand to attention and salute the TV monitors as the clip is run. For additional piquancy, the Russian national anthem loudly rings out around the room in accompaniment. The use of genuine archival footage from YouTube for the finale is a dramatically effective way to end the show, whilst also reminding us that this is a work grounded in such material, if by that point the absurdity of it all had reached such a degree that we as spectators had forgotten the documentary-archival nature of what we are seeing. As an instance of ‘new documentarism’, *YouTube/В полиции* is a document-based performance that draws from the vast yet relatively untouched digital video archive that is YouTube in the construction of its absurdist-grotesque scenes of life in a Russian police station.

With the significant caveat that YouTube is a platform owned by the world’s largest surveillance capitalist firm Google, the online video sharing site retains huge and still-growing potential as a source of material for documentary theatre, and indeed for any form of art that seeks to explore questions about the present through the use of archival documents. Making sense of the world through the collation, re-presentation,

and interpretation of documents has always been the operational mode of documentary theatre and continues to be so, regardless of the particular form of document that is used. Similar to the loosening of the limits of fine art to an expanded field of practice in modernity, documentary theatre is benefitting from recasting the net wider into the digital space of content sharing in the realm of social media. The existence of this new archive and its exploitation by data miners and big tech firms should encourage artists to do the same, as a creative, ethical response to the crisis of democracy that surveillance capitalism has brought about.³⁴ In a simplified sense, the use of YouTube in creating a show for Teatr Praktika is comparable to the surveillance capitalists profiting from the platform. It takes the raw materials willingly uploaded by its billions of users and processes them, with the ultimate aim of making sense of them in a way that is meaningful to consumers, the difference being that in this case it happens to be theatre goers seeking entertainment, rather than commercial companies seeking business insights.

YouTube/B нолууу can perhaps be viewed as the analogue cousin of another satirical high-camp performance to be found on YouTube. In January 2019, a group of young male students at the Ul'ianovsk Civil Aviation Academy released a clip of themselves dancing semi-naked around their dormitory in a memetic parody of a parody – originally made by British Army soldiers in 2013 – of the Benny Benassi hit pop song ‘Satisfaction’ (2002).³⁵ The original music video to this song involved scantily dressed women humorously demonstrating the functions of DIY equipment. This copy of a copy by the Ul'ianovsk cadets led to a public furore, which threatened

³⁴ Zuboff describes democracy as ‘under siege’ by surveillance capitalist firms. See Zuboff, p. 519.

³⁵ Aleksei Xhlebin, *Kak razvlekaiut piloty mezhdou poletami, Ul'ianovsk snova znamenit*, online video recording, YouTube, 16 January 2018, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjBuk-onVWM>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

the future careers of the young men.³⁶ Their plight caught the imagination of Russian social media and subsequently inspired a remarkable number of similar parodies by groups of citizens who came out publicly in support. This included Petersburg бабушки, Moscow State University skiers, МЧС cadets, builders from Khimki, and a group of sewing factory workers, to name a few. The flood of videos imitating the Ul'ianovsk cadets were all uploaded to YouTube and helped propel the original video to fame, with over 1.25 million views.³⁷ Whilst this is the kind of public visibility that fringe theatre in Russia rarely enjoys, there are notable similarities in the processes that underlie the professional stage performance of *YouTube/В полиции* and the non-professional home video made by the Ul'ianovsk cadets. The chief similarity between them is their iterative quality and the ability of both to do what Lavender describes in relation to viral YouTube video performances – to ‘morph through different frames of reference’.³⁸ What started off as light distraction for the Ul'ianovsk cadets during time off quickly became political, as the video caught the attention of the authorities, and the young men and their bodies were drawn into the overactive regulatory regime of High Putinist conservative reactionism. As the examination of the cultural policy documents revealed above, tight control and regulation of youth education and development is a primary concern for the realisation of the ‘гармонично развитая личность’ of the ideal society of the future. This was clearly demonstrated in the public castigation of the young men, which was framed in the terms of social, political, and sexual norms.

³⁶ See Vsevolod Boiko, “‘Nosit’ furazhku s trusami ne zapreshcheno”. *Chem zakonchilas’ istoriia s tantsami kursantov*, *BBC Russian*, 18 January 2018 <<https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-42737449>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

³⁷ The original video is now hosted by many different users, who have reposted it. This figure is a rough total of those that are the most viewed at the time of writing.

³⁸ Andy Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 125.

Authenticity is cited by some scholars as the defining cultural trope of the digital age, as we increasingly search for the ‘authentic’ in an ever more artificial, virtual world.³⁹ It was seemingly the element of authenticity that made the Ul’ianovsk cadets’ parody dangerous, transgressing as it did the hardening conservative mores of High Putinist cultural policy. Whilst *YouTube/B полиция*, by its very nature as theatre and therefore not ‘real’, could not function with the same symbolic power, it can still be viewed as a manifestation of what social historian James C. Scott called ‘infrapolitics’.⁴⁰ Infrapolitics are the micro-political actions of resistance and/or opposition to dominant power structures that take place every day but are invisible to, or go unnoticed in, the open political realm. Crucially, according to Scott, infrapolitical actions are ‘the elementary forms of political life on which more elaborate, open, institutional forms may be built and on which they are likely to depend for their vitality’.⁴¹ Scott locates these everyday actions in what he calls the ‘hidden transcript’, which is in contrast to the ‘public transcript’.⁴² In this conceptualization, there is a division between public and private discourse that privileges the visibility of those in positions of power. In infrapolitics, discourses of true collective feeling or opinion that are invisible in the mainstream political realm can be detected in less visible forums outside of it. When, however, the hidden transcript irrupts unexpectedly into the public realm, it temporarily exists in a liminal space between private and public, making up one of the many acts of micro-resistance that collectively form the base of real politics and without which the latter cannot exist. Theatre, of which ‘new documentarism’ is a part, traditionally exists neither

³⁹ See, for example, Daniel Schulze, *Authenticity in Contemporary Theatre and Performance: Make It Real* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). See also Lavender, and Rutten.

⁴⁰ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 183-201.

⁴¹ Scott, p. 200.

⁴² Scott, pp. 4-5.

fully in the hidden nor public realm, taking place behind doors, but nonetheless accessible through the purchase of a ticket (the exceptions to this – such as street performance, which is public, and studio theatre, which is hidden – prove the rule). As such, theatre always has the potential to act as a conduit between the two realms. Its liminal status as performance that is not ‘real’ provides a platform for alternative discourses to the dominant to rise to the surface and threaten the integrity of the ‘real’ public transcript. Thus, whilst *YouTube/В полиции* could not achieve the same explosive subversiveness as the Ul’ianovsk cadets achieved, it was nonetheless a small but significant bellwether of broader cultural trends and collective feeling at the time, hidden in the less visible realms of public discourse.

Locker room talk

Locker room talk is an adaptation of a play by Scottish dramatist Gary McNair.⁴³ It is notable for a number of reasons, not least of which is the fact that it involved an entirely female production team, down to the stage crew. The creators of the production – director Ada Mukhina, choreographer Dar’ia Iuriichuk, and critic-turned-theatre-maker Ol’ga Tarakanova – were all women below the age of thirty at the time, and were keen to point out that ‘female’ includes anyone identifying as such.⁴⁴ Given the paucity of rigorous feminist discourse in contemporary Russian theatre, this is already a good indicator of what kind of production this is. The history

⁴³ Following the differing conventions in Russian and English capitalization of titles, *Locker room talk* refers to the Russian adaptation of Gary McNair’s original *Locker Room Talk* (London: Oberon Books, 2017).

⁴⁴ ‘Мы называем женщинами тех, кто определяет свой гендер как женский, и тех, чьи тела идентифицируют как женские’. See production page on Meyerhold Centre website: <<http://meyerhold.ru/locker-room-talk-2/>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

of *Locker room talk* starts at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2017, when Mukhina was in attendance at a performance of McNair's verbatim play about the phenomenon of so-called 'locker room talk', which is the often misogynistic, sexist, derogatory discourse that goes on behind closed doors in the exclusively male homosocial space, typified by the 'locker room' or changing room. The play was inspired by the revelations of the sexist language used by then new US President Donald Trump as he described what amounted to sexual harassment to a journalist in 2005, and his later dismissal of this language as mere 'locker room banter'.⁴⁵ McNair set out to explore this phenomenon further, and his play is described as 'honest conversations with men when women are not around'.⁴⁶

More than a year after seeing McNair's verbatim drama about male 'locker room talk' in Edinburgh, Mukhina participated in the Meyerhold Centre's Blackbox residency programme, which in its 2018 edition was dedicated to documentary theatre. The art-director of the Meyerhold Centre, Elena Koval'skaia, wished to reconsider the documentary form as a technique of theatre making, questioning its applicability and utility some two decades after its emergence as a major force in post-Soviet Russian theatre. Writing in an article for *Teatr* journal, Koval'skaia attributed this interrogation of the old documentary methods to the participants in the residency:

⁴⁵ David A. Fahrenthold, 'Trump recorded having extremely lewd conversation about women in 2005', *Washington Post*, 8 October 2016
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4_story.html> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁴⁶ Website of Gary McNair: <<https://www.garymcnair.co.uk/locker-room-talk/>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

Ее участники усомнились в том методе, которым с ними делились кураторы Саша Денисова и Александр Родионов. Этот метод – верbatim, лежавший в основе постсоветского документального театра.⁴⁷

In an interview I conducted with Mukhina, however, she contradicted Koval'skaia's version of events, giving credit precisely to Koval'skaia for challenging the participants to re-think the possibilities of the genre:

Эта лаборатория, которую они сделали в ЦИМе, она была посвящена новой документальности, то есть они пытались, поскольку там Грeмина и Угаров умерли, Елена Ковальская, которая руководительница Центра, которая их хорошо знала, сказала: 20 лет уже театру документальному в России, надо переосмыслить его. Как мы вообще по-другому его можем делать.⁴⁸

The Blackbox programme at the Meyerhold Centre always entails the participants submitting proposals for productions at the conclusion of the residency. The most promising proposal is selected, given financial and practical backing, and ultimately shown on the theatre's Main Stage. As a result of this laboratory, Mukhina suggested to Iuriichuk and Tarakanova that they propose – as an all-female working group – to adapt McNair's verbatim text, exploring the effect of misogynistic language on the female body. Their proposal was selected, and the Russian adaptation of McNair's play premiered at the Meyerhold Centre in June 2019. Although the status of this production as a documentary work is not immediately apparent by conventional standards, in the context of McNair's verbatim text and of the Meyerhold Centre's documentary laboratory programme, it becomes apparent that, similarly to the previous two works in this chapter, we are dealing with the 'new documentarism' sought by Koval'skaia.

⁴⁷ Koval'skaia, 'Krutye pandusy', p. 55. Aleksandr Rodionov is the son of Elena Gremina.

⁴⁸ Mukhina, Unpublished interview.

If in the verbatim method, theatre makers sought a social group or individual as an object of investigation, then the generation of ‘new documentarists’ has a tendency to take itself as its object. There is a process of subjectivization here similar to that which occurred with the rise of identity politics and third-wave feminism (to which *Locker room talk* is connected by the feminist activists involved in the work). This process is also visible in the work of Teatr.doc after 2010, when the search for objectivity and the ‘zero position’ were partly abandoned in favour of subjective truths and explorations of subjectivity more generally. Where *Locker room talk* departs from documentary theatre is in its de-centring of the text, and in its employment of somatic practices from contemporary dance, performance art, and participatory theatre. In this approach, it has much in common with the winner of the Blackbox residency from the previous year, *Конституция* (although stylistically they are very different). Under Koval’skaia’s stewarding, this kind of document-based performance that reflects an expanded field of documentary practice seems to be an emerging trend at the Meyerhold Centre.

What the spectator sees unfold during a performance of *Locker room talk* is an investigation – the working methods of the team in their attempts to unpack and comprehend the verbatim text that lies at the base of the production. The performance is presented in the form of a conference, with presentations, slideshows, and panel discussions. It opens with the projection of the running order on to a large screen positioned in the centre of the stage. It is worth noting in this regard that the stage is configured as a ‘black box’ space, so although there is a delineation between performance space and auditorium where the spectators are seated, the stage is not raised from the level of the first row of seats. This means that audience members can be summoned on to the stage without difficulty. This is especially important for the

final scene, or ‘доклад’ as they are called, where spectators must be able to enter the performance space quickly and with ease, when they are individually summoned. The other notable features of the stage set-up include a long table positioned stage right, where the mixing desk is stationed in plain view, rather than hidden out of sight as is customary. Performers sit at the table when not directly involved in the presentation taking place. They sit behind laptop screens, surrounded by microphones and cables. Stage left is a green screen and camcorder on a tripod, waiting expectantly to be brought into the action.

If there is any doubt about the seriousness of the creators’ intent, it is quickly dispelled as they introduce their work from behind slick transparent lecterns that give an impression of weightlessness. In images reminiscent of Meierkhol’d’s futurist production of Maiakovskii’s *Клон* (1929), the presenters are equipped with clipboards and headsets, and are dressed in costumes that resemble lab coats and medical scrubs, designed by contemporary Petersburg artist Anastasiia Kizilova. This format of conference-performance is a close relative of the lecture-performance genre pioneered in recent years most notably by French social scientist and philosopher Bruno Latour.⁴⁹ This trend is also visible in the hugely popular phenomenon of TED Talks and its many imitators, which are all products of the rise of the internet and of YouTube as an online free digital archive, as explored earlier in relation to *YouTube/Бполиции*. The first thing that the audience is presented with in *Locker room talk* is a schedule for the conference-performance, which gives a good sense of the themes that will be addressed. This appeared projected on to a large screen in full view of the audience and looked as follows:

⁴⁹ See, for example, Latour’s 2018 lecture-performance *Inside*, available in two different versions on YouTube.

расписание конференции по тексту locker room talk:

равенство (доклад-инструкция) – настя ковальчук, саша долгова

системы оценки (доклад-классификация) – даша юрийчук, ада мухина

идеальная женщина (панельная дискуссия) – ольга тараканова, алиса кибин

токсичная идеология [*sic*] (аффективный перформанс) – коля нокекельн et al.

если твоя мама услышит (вербатим-рэп) – коллективная презентация

возражения (сцена-тренажер) – ада мухина et al.

закрытие (спекулятивный фуршет)

In McNair's original play, there are fourteen sections dealing with different aspects of toxic masculine discourse. Here it is cut down to six sections, with the audience being invited on stage for a seventh, in what is effectively the post-performance discussion. This is in the best tradition of Russian documentary theatre, where the post-performance discussion is an essential component, but here it is reconfigured into a less familiar format – the фуршет, or buffet reception, complete with a selection of fruit, biscuits, and confectionery for the audience to enjoy whilst informally interacting with each other and discussing their impressions with the performers. Mukhina cites a lack of time and resources that prevented the team from investigating and presenting on every section of McNair's text (they managed less than half). However, from a spectator's perspective, the performance did not suffer from a lack of material, and indeed perhaps benefitted from the enforced cuts, which had the effect of making the choices of specific topics more targeted and selective, even if this

was not entirely by design. The list of ‘доклады’ indicates the uncompromising feminist critique of toxic masculinity, casual sexism, and patriarchy more broadly that is to come. Some of the key moments from the performance will be described in more detail to reflect on the tactics used by the creators for convincing the audience that ‘locker room talk’ is a social problem worth addressing.

According to Mukhina, sections one and two were made first, performed as preliminary sketches for the Meyerhold Centre management and staff, as a way of monitoring the progress of the newly-commissioned work as it was taking shape. Entitled ‘равенство’ and ‘системы оценки’, they both confront the gender inequality that continues to exist in contemporary society in spite of many wishing to believe to the contrary. The performers start by repeating aloud the warning contained in the description on the webpage:

Спектакль может вызвать сложные и/или неприятные переживания у людей, имеющих травматический опыт эмоционального или физического насилия.⁵⁰

They go on to list the ‘trigger warnings’, so as to fully inform their audience about what they are going to see. These warnings include ‘пошлые шутки, ненормативная лексика, гомофобные и расистские высказывания, риторика мужского доминирования, оценка тел и дегуманизация женщин’.⁵¹ All these features come out with especial clarity in the second ‘доклад’, which explores the ‘scoring’ systems used by men to evaluate women’s looks. As to be expected, these are entirely superficial evaluative systems, and are extremely crude. There is a particularly damning scene in which the group explores the evaluation of a woman as a ‘paper bag job’ – this involves Iuriichuk putting various different kinds of carrier bag over her

⁵⁰ Meyerhold Centre website.

⁵¹ Ibid.

head, in an attempt to investigate the practicality of concealing a woman's head during sex. The unsurprising conclusion is that it is not only discomforting and impractical but also poses a real danger of suffocation. Although this experiment takes a piece of 'locker room banter' and literalises it in a manner that few would intend in practice, it nonetheless starkly reveals the implicit violence that underlies this kind of casual sexist language that occurs without thought or reflection on its implications.

The paper bag scene is combined with an investigation into the problematic notion of the 'ideal' female body, which is mentioned in the original text in reference to the character played by TV star Pamela Anderson in the hit US series *Baywatch*.⁵² To probe this idea in combination with the previous one, Mukhina changes into a red swimsuit similar to the one famously worn by Anderson, and in front of the green screen she begins to run on the spot. Using the camcorder in conjunction with a handheld iPhone, they are able to project onstage a livestream video of Mukhina running along a generic beach with her face distorted, in order to achieve both notions of the 'ideal body' and the 'paper bag job' simultaneously. Although there is a heavy dose of irony in this literalised enactment of a male discourse not necessarily intended to be taken literally – and indeed it drew a great deal of laughter and astonished bemusement from the (predominantly female) audience – it is intended to make a serious point. Clearly, however, the emotional response will be different for different genders. Whilst for cis women it may be shocking, revelatory, infuriating, or informative (or perhaps none of these), for cis men it is more likely to be embarrassing, shameful, reflective, challenging to identity and/or self, and re-evaluative (or perhaps none of these).

⁵² Anderson starred from 1992 to 1997, although the show itself ran from 1989 to 1999.

One of the questions for the theatre makers in their preliminary investigations had been to what extent misogynistic discourse is universal or particular to country or language. This was answered in one of the internal previews at the Meyerhold Centre when, upon seeing this scene, one of the young male directors from the theatre commented to the team: ‘ну а че такого-то, естественно, такая шутка с пакетом, еще в школе шутили, а че такого-то?’⁵³ This was much to the surprise of the creative team of young women, who had not known prior to this that such a joke existed amongst men in Russia, as well as in the English-speaking world. The difficulty cis men have in understanding why these issues are important to women, and indeed why the phenomenon of ‘locker room talk’ is a problem at all, was aptly reflected in the response by then artistic director of the theatre, Viktor Ryzhakov, who was allegedly struggling to grasp what the all-female creative team were trying to achieve with their performance. Koval’skaia wrote in *Teatr* journal how Ryzhakov doubted that ‘его авторок действительно беспокоит сексизм’.⁵⁴ In our interview, Mukhina commented on this:

Мужчина, руководитель институции, начинает спрашивать женщин, зачем вы ставите пьесу о сексизме, в чем ваша цель? Он реально не сечет, что это проблемная сама по себе история.⁵⁵

As Mukhina points out, the problem is not just the ‘locker room’ language itself. The problem also lies in the inability of many men to appreciate why it is an issue or even to acknowledge it as such. This is where the scenes that investigate the content and implications of ‘locker room’ language and toxic masculinity more generally can be effective – they can initiate processes of re-evaluation, in the knowledge that it is not

⁵³ Mukhina.

⁵⁴ Koval’skaia, ‘Krutye pandusy’, p. 53.

⁵⁵ Mukhina.

a quick or easy task, and that general awareness is the first step towards challenging and eventually overturning entrenched forms of patriarchy.

The four sections that follow the first two are variations on a theme, employing different presentational methods in an attempt to explore the issues from a variety of angles. These are respectively labelled as ‘панельная дискуссия’, ‘аффективный перформанс’, ‘вербатим-рэп’, and ‘сцена-тренажер’. The first two of these include the involvement of a trans woman, Alisa Kibin, as well as someone currently transitioning, Kolia Noekel’n. They both separately explore the emotional complexities and practical difficulties of being trans in contemporary Russia, and familiarise audiences with common questions surrounding, for example, language (gendered pronouns and verbs, etc.). These presentations not only help to answer questions that the uninitiated may have, but also importantly give a rare public platform to representatives of the trans community. An extra dimension is added to each performance of *Locker room talk* by the changing physiognomy and appearance over time of Kolia Noekel’n as they are in the process of transitioning. This aspect emphasises the event-ness of the performance for the audience, as each iteration is definitively unique due to Noekel’n’s ever-evolving ‘аффективный перформанс’. The title of his ‘доклад’ – токсичная идеология – has the Roman letters ‘lol’ incongruously sitting in the middle of the Cyrillic letters of the word ‘идеология’. This refers to McNair’s original verbatim text where, in a slip of the tongue, a man being interviewed describes feminism as a ‘toxic ideology’ [*sic*].⁵⁶ The decision to keep the Roman letters in amongst the Cyrillic additionally brings out the presence of the English acronym ‘lol’ – millennial text speak for ‘laugh out loud’ – which has passed into Russian usage. So-called ‘lol culture’ speaks to the themes of the

⁵⁶ McNair, *Locker Room Talk*, pp. 34, 41.

production: where anything can be dismissed as a casual joke, not to be taken seriously or allowed to offend, by the addendum (spoken or written) of the now ubiquitous acronym ‘lol’, there are additional barriers to calling out problematic and offensive language. Challenging ‘lol culture’ for its complicity in perpetuating toxic discourse continues into the penultimate presentation – ‘если твоя мама услышит’ – in which many of the most derogatory and sexist so-called ‘jokes’ are compiled into a verbal montage and fired at the audience in quick succession. This has the effect of compounding many of the issues raised in the previous sections and overloading the spectator with the extent to which ‘locker room talk’ has entrenched itself as a normalised form of discourse in the exclusively male social domain.

All of the previous sections in one way or another combine to set up for the final performed section – ‘возражение’. This is led by Mukhina, who prior to the making of *Locker room talk* studied contemporary theatre practice in Berlin and London, where she became acquainted with Augusto Boal’s ‘theatre of the oppressed’. Labelled a ‘сцена-тренажер’, this section is a demonstration of Boal’s practice of so-called ‘forum theatre’.⁵⁷ The concept of ‘forum theatre’ is to activate the spectator by motivating them to take direct action through intervention in the scene being performed. The use of the word ‘forum’ is not accidental, emphasising the roots of the concept in the Roman forum, where people met in public to discuss and exchange ideas. ‘Forum theatre’ is just one aspect of Boal’s broader umbrella term, the ‘theatre of the oppressed’, which he intended as an emancipatory form of engagement between theatre practitioners and society. He says the following about the place of the spectator in his theatre:

⁵⁷ See Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. by Charles A. & Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), pp. 139-42.

In order to understand this *poetics of the oppressed* one must keep in mind its main objective: to change the people – ‘spectators’, passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon – into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action.⁵⁸

Whilst parallels can be drawn here to Lehmann’s conceptualizing of the active spectator in his later formulation of postdramatic theatre, a more lateral connection is to the ideas of social historian James C. Scott, mentioned above in connection with *YouTube/B πολιτισμ*. According to Scott, the ‘hidden transcript’ that occasionally breaks out into the open and challenges the power vertical in a given social hierarchy ‘has a prehistory that explains its capacity to produce political breakthroughs’.⁵⁹ This prehistory usually takes the form of ‘infrapolitics’ that Scott detects everywhere in the everyday life of oppressed social groups. Approaching Boal’s conceptualization of the ‘theatre of the oppressed’ from the perspective of Scott, we see a deliberate attempt to force the hidden transcript out into the public domain by means of training exercises or rehearsals. As Boal states:

Maybe the theatre in itself is not revolutionary, but these theatrical forms are without doubt a *rehearsal of revolution*. [...] Within its fictitious limits, the experience is a concrete one.⁶⁰

The ‘revolution’ that Boal refers to is the overturning of established oppressive power hierarchies through openly challenging them, which necessarily constitutes the hidden transcript irrupting into the public one. This ‘challenge’, according to Boal, can and must be rehearsed in advance, to increase the chances of success:

⁵⁸ Boal, p. 122.

⁵⁹ Scott, p. 227.

⁶⁰ Boal, p. 141. Italics in original.

The rehearsal stimulates the practice of the act in reality. [...] The practice of these theatrical forms creates a sort of uneasy sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfillment through real action.⁶¹

As suggested by the title of the ‘доклад’ – возражение (сцена-тренажер) – this scene in *Locker room talk* is to be one such rehearsal, training the spectators to object in a social situation where otherwise the offensive ‘locker room banter’ would go unchallenged. Mukhina goes about this by constructing a scenario based on a drinking game in which men are called ‘мужики’ and women are called ‘суки’, for no good reason other than that being the convention of the game. Using the ‘forum theatre’ model, the scene is acted out once by the performers, then it is repeated, but this time the spectators are invited to intervene in the scene to try to alter the behaviour of the performers in the game with the ultimate aim of changing its outcome. The performers come prepared in advance to try to cover every possible eventuality and to work out ways to always circumvent the intervention of the spectator so that the same outcome is always reached. This intransigence is intended to demonstrate the deep-rootedness of oppressive social hierarchies and the exceptional difficulty in overcoming them, but through proactive engagement with the exercise and trial-and-error perseverance it should always be possible to beat the system and re-write the outcome of the scene.

Discussing the role of the spectator in this form of theatre, Boal clarifies:

The spectator [...] changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change – in short, trains himself for real action.⁶²

The spectators in the performance of *Locker room talk* that I observed were not afraid to get involved, and they tried out various tactics to change the rules of the game so as

⁶¹ Boal, p. 142.

⁶² Boal, p. 122.

to eradicate the casual use of derogatory sexist language. Whilst the first couple of spectators-turned-participants (including one man) tried and failed to circumnavigate the rules of the game away from casual misogyny, it was clear that the trial-and-error process was having an effect, as the behaviour and tactics employed by the performers against each new intervening spectator became more arbitrary and thus more ridiculous from an outside perspective. The most successful intervention came from a female spectator who, after repeated requests to the performers to cease using sexist language, resorted to throwing over the drinks tray, and so preventing the others from continuing the game. In this iteration of the scene, the spectator-participant simply refused to allow the game to continue if the other participants did not alter their behaviour and this meant ultimately bringing the game to a halt. This was a successful example of an intervention that fulfilled the objective of ‘forum theatre’ – firstly to call out and secondly to disrupt social oppression in daily life, in order to be a vehicle for positive change.

The description on the Meyerhold Centre website states that, amongst other things, *Locker room talk* ‘подстегивает политическое воображение и предлагает пространство для феминистской утопии’.⁶³ The ‘feminist utopia’ referred to here emerges out of the exercise in ‘forum theatre’, during which objection to and intervention in an oppressive situation is rehearsed with the spectators as a part of the performance, in the hope that a similar situation in real life could be successfully challenged in the future. Social equality and respect – of oneself and others – are a far cry from blindly misogynist fears of what a feminist utopia might look like. Once the ‘forum theatre’ rehearsal ends, it gives way to the actual forum: the audience is invited on stage to start discussions with each other and with the performers about any

⁶³ Meyerhold Centre website.

or all of the issues arising from what they have seen and felt during the performance, as well as to share and exchange personal stories of their own that are related to the problem of ‘locker room’ discourse.

To give additional insight into what the creative team behind *Locker room talk* were trying to achieve, it is worth quoting Mukhina at length, speaking about how she, Iuriichuk, and Tarakanova together went about choosing the other participants they wanted involved in the project:

В «Локере» мы звали с собой работать людей не из театра, то есть, например, Алиса Кибин – она диджей. То есть она никогда не работала в театре. Мы подумали – о, прикольно, может быть, нам взять всех остальных тоже в таком же ключе, то есть художница из современного искусства, она тоже никогда не работала в театре. Это было тяжело, но интересный результат получился. И художница по костюмам тоже не из театра, она просто художница. У нее была своя линия одежды. Настя Кизилова, она тоже феминистка. Мы просто ей написали и сказали, слушай, хочешь с нами. Она говорит – давайте я вам эту свою линию одежды, которую я разрабатывала, думаю тоже о всяких феминистских штуках, давайте я на вас ее сделаю.⁶⁴

Similar to some of the examples of Teatr.doc’s ‘civic theatre’ seen in the previous chapter, the makers of *Locker room talk* went about bringing in non-theatrical people to collaborate on their project. This situates the production outside of the institutional norms of the theatre, which is a reflection of its theme: feminist activism as a marginal outsider to dominant patriarchy. This is true even for an institution as progressive and experimental as the Meyerhold Centre, in which the (male) artistic director doubted the motives of the (female) creative team, and yet which is needless to say one of the only theatres in Moscow where a performance of this kind could have been made.

⁶⁴ Mukhina.

Much as Boal's 'theatre of the oppressed' is a radically inclusive participatory practice that nonetheless remains theatre, the creators of *Locker room talk* likewise assembled a team from outside the theatre to create a work that is fundamentally and intensely theatrical. Taking the initiative from Boal, this production targets oppressive power hierarchies in the linguistic field through revealing the existence of the problem, investigating why it is a problem, and rehearsing for future direct action. If Boal's theatre was a harbinger of the theatres of engagement that characterise the contemporary era, its techniques still have something to offer to theatre makers seeking to re-imagine the possibilities of working with documents to create socially engaged (and, no less importantly, engaging) work. In its employment of Boal, the politics of *Locker room talk* intersect with broader global trends in contemporary theatre. For example, the UK-based theatre collective Earth Ensemble (which is affiliated with the Extinction Rebellion climate activist movement) extensively employs the theories and practices of the 'theatre of the oppressed' in its work.⁶⁵

At first glance, *Locker room talk* may not appear to be a work of documentary theatre, but upon closer inspection it emerges as such, answering Koval'skaia's call to the emerging generation of theatre makers to rethink the possibilities of the genre. Like the two other productions considered in this chapter, *Locker room talk* uses documents as the raw material for its experimental performance practices. These three document-based performances each in their own way expand the field of documentary theatre, contributing to the emergence of a 'new documentarism', which correspondingly contains new discourses and new horizons for engagement with the social and the political in the world at large.

⁶⁵ Acquaintance with the working methods and practices of Earth Ensemble was gained from participation in a workshop led by the group as part of the symposium 'Theatre and Climate Change', held at the University of Oxford on 7 March 2020.

3) Body Politics: ‘Новая драма’ in High Putinism

The concept of ‘Новая драма’ has been much debated and contested since its inception in 2002, meaning different things for different people. This has ranged from claims of a coherent transnational artistic movement to – most simply – new writing. Whilst claims that ‘Новая драма’ had run its course at the end of the first decade of this century have proved to be premature, its nature over the past decade has undeniably changed. Most notably, ‘Новая драма’ is no longer the ‘transnational project’ that it once was – after the events in Ukraine in 2014, it more or less split into its constituent nations and, particularly in the case of Ukraine, into its respective national languages.¹ That said, however, 2020 witnessed the largest number of submissions of Russian-language new plays to Moscow’s Liubimovka Festival in its thirty year history (815 scripts), and this continues to include submissions from Ukraine and Belarus, as well as other countries from the former Soviet Union and around the world where there are Russian-speaking diasporas. Even within Russia itself, ‘Новая драма’ is continually declared to be over, by theatre makers and critics alike. In an interview with the theatre director Zarema Zaudinova of Teatr.doc on this topic in 2019, for example, she stated:

Со смертью Гречиной и Угарова, этот период в театре закончился. Уже совсем другая реальность. Мы живем в другом мире, в другой России, чем та, которая была в период ‘Новой драмы’. [...] В 2012 году страна поменялась, после ‘Болотного дела’.²

Zaudinova here considers the major turning point to have been the violent suppression of the opposition to Putin’s re-election in 2012, which culminated in the arrests of a

¹ See J.A.E. Curtis, ‘Introduction’, in *New Drama in Russian: Performance, Politics and Protest in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), p. 1.

² Zarema Zaudinova, Unpublished interview with author, Moscow, September 2019.

number of protesters on Bolotnaia Square and their subsequent imprisonment in a case that came to be known as ‘Болотное дело’. However, it was not until the loss in 2018 of the creators and driving forces of the ‘Новая драма’ movement, Mikhail Ugarov and Elena Gremina, that its coherence and unity as a project suffered a setback from which it is unlikely to recover. For Zaudinova, the ‘Новая драма’ movement has served its purpose – there are now new kinds of plays in Russia that are written and staged, and its legacy is a number of theatres, in Moscow and elsewhere, that specialise in new writing.

Although Zaudinova claims that the opportunities for staging new works are fewer than in the heyday of ‘Новая драма’, nonetheless a handful of works from the main competition of the annual Liubimovka Festival usually get noticed and make the difficult transition from rehearsed reading to full stage production. The winner of the Brewhouse Stage Grant – which is an annual grant awarded to the most promising new play in the festival, to facilitate bringing the work to the stage as a full production – at the 2017 Liubimovka Festival was Belarusian Andrei Ivanov’s *Сучилища*. This play went on to be staged in Moscow at the state-financed Pushkin Theatre, and subsequently elsewhere, including in Serov, in a production that garnered Ivanov a Golden Mask nomination for ‘best work by a dramatist’.³ In 2018, the strong female showing at the Liubimovka was affirmed by the awarding of the Brewhouse Stage Grant to Ol’ga Shiliaeva’s *28 дней*. The full production premiered the following year on the stage of Teatr.doc, and in a repetition of Ivanov’s success the previous year, gained the debutant dramatist a nomination in the same Golden Mask category, as well as two further nominations in other categories (‘small-form drama’ and ‘best

³ This also included a nomination in the category of ‘best small-form drama’. See Golden Mask website <http://www.goldenmask.ru/fest_24_183.html> [accessed 23 December 2020].

work by a director’).⁴ Other plays from the 2018 Liubimovka to receive full stage productions include Maria Ogneva’s *За белым кроликом* at the Meyerhold Centre, and Aleksei Oleinikov’s play-in-verse *Хлебзавод*, which premiered in the Eastern Siberian city of Krasnoiarsk some two years after its rehearsed reading at the festival.⁵

The conversion rate from rehearsed reading to full stage production overall remains low, however, and one of the problems faced by emerging dramatists in the second and third decades of this century is actually the success of the first generation of ‘Новая драма’ writers, many of whom have broken through on to the stages of the state theatres and have been integrated into the theatrical hierarchy. Writers such as Ivan Vyrypaev, Mikhail Durnenkov, Pavel Priazhko, and Iaroslava Pulinovich dominate the programming of new works by the state-funded theatres, meaning that opportunities for lesser-known or untried writers have become harder to come by. Whilst Teatr.doc is famous for being financially independent from the state, allowing it full artistic freedom, it nonetheless used to apply for and receive grants for individual projects. This came to an end with the crackdowns on the cultural sphere that followed the war with Ukraine and the introduction of a more actively interventionist cultural policy, as outlined in the introduction. The decision to tie state funding to political loyalty to the regime meant Teatr.doc became strictly off-limits for the receipt of cultural grants, further starving it of funds and exacerbating the lack of opportunities for staging new works independently of the state. However, as the examples above demonstrate, new works of drama continue to filter through in a small number on to the stages of both state-funded and independent theatres. Whether

⁴ See Golden Mask 2020 nominations page: <https://www.goldenmask.ru/fest_26_198.html> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁵ *Хлебзавод* opened the 2020 season at the Krasnoiarskii TIUZ, directed by Nikita Betekhtin, who at the same theatre one year earlier also directed a production of Masha Kontorovich’s *Мама, мне оторвало руку*, a play that featured in the main competition of the 2017 Liubimovka Festival.

we still want to call this ‘Новая драма’ or not, it continues in the same historical lineage, centred around the Liubimovka Festival and Teatr.doc. The wave of legislative changes after 2012 that ushered in a new era of censorship and Socialist-Realist-style cultural ideology has significantly altered the conditions for theatre making in Russia in recent years, making it necessary to talk about ‘Новая драма’ before and after 2012. ‘Новая драма’ in High Putinism is, therefore, both a continuation of the well-established artistic movement from the first decade of this century, and distinct from it.

This chapter examines three examples of plays from the High Putinist period that continue the traditions of ‘Новая драма’. It considers the politics and aesthetics of these works, which are concerned primarily with the body and corporeal forms of subjectivity. Whilst the body is not a new preoccupation for twenty-first-century Russian drama, it has become increasingly politicised as a result of the formation of the ‘новая модель культурной политики’, which foregrounds the body, particularly that of youth, at the centre of its conservative-nationalist ideological project.

The first play to be considered is Dmitrii Danilov’s award-winning *Человек из Подольска*, which beat Ivanov’s aforementioned *С училища* to the Golden Mask award for ‘best work by a dramatist’ in 2018. This was a Teatr.doc production, directed by Mikhail Ugarov. The fact that a Teatr.doc production was competing with a Liubimovka Festival winner for the ‘best dramatist’ prize in that year shows the important role that these institutions of the ‘Новая драма’ movement continue to play in the landscape of specifically new writing in Russia, in spite of the marginalization and blacklisting of Teatr.doc itself. *Человек из Подольска* takes a story typical in recent years on Russian social media newsfeeds – a young man being arbitrarily arrested without pretext or explanation and interrogated in a local police station – and

turns it into a philosophical exploration of human perception. Police violence upon the mind and body of the arrestee focuses the viewer's attention on the prevailing body politics of High Putinism. There is a further reflection here on one of the mantras of 'Новая драма' – the 'zero position' – and its place in theatre aesthetics during a time of conservative-authoritarian reaction.⁶

The second play is Valerii Pecheikin's *Философы, или Великая оргия*. This work featured at the Liubimovka in 2016 but has never received a full stage production. It is unlikely that this will be possible for as long as the current state cultural policy and the accompanying legal restrictions remain in place. Tashkent-born Pecheikin emerged out of the Liubimovka Festival in the late 2000s and has established himself in recent years as the in-house dramatist for Kirill Serebrennikov's Gogol Centre. By his own admission, he writes few new plays nowadays, so this work is an example of how one of the big names from the second generation of 'Новая драма' writers has moved away from text-based new writing to focus more on visual theatre and film. This play displays a politics that rejects the normative regimes of High Putinism in relation to gender and sexuality, promoting instead a liberal politics of the body and sexual difference.

The final play is the aforementioned Liubimovka grant-winning and 2019 Golden Mask-nominated *28 дней*, by Ol'ga Shiliaeva. This work was described by its producers and by critics alike as a 'феминистская оратория'.⁷ It addresses the topic of the menstrual cycle, and the associated social, political, and economic issues that make this subject taboo in contemporary Russia. The challenging of taboos has been

⁶ The 'zero position' is essential in any analysis of 'Новая драма'. As one critic commented in 2013, 'В каком-то смысле ноль-позиция — это и есть позиция НД [Новой драмы]'. See Timur Khakimov, 'Obnulenie nol'-pozitsii', *Iskusstvo kino*, 5 (2013) <<http://old.kinoart.ru/archive/2013/05/obnulenie-nol-pozitsii>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁷ It is described as such on the production's website page, for example: <<https://teatrdoc.ru/events.php?id=258>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

identified as one of the main traits in the emergence of the ‘Новая драма’ movement.⁸ Taboos – the number of which has been on the increase since the conservative-authoritarian turn in Russia – are the markers of ideological norms in society, and are thus often the frontier of conflict, charting the shifting lines of cultural and political discourse. In High Putinist ideology, taboos should be left unchallenged and social antagonism ideally eradicated, meaning that artistic works which challenge the political consensus become undesirable elements, even labelled as ‘псевдокультура’ in official state documents (see introduction). In its tackling of a major social taboo, Shiliaeva’s play represents a continuation of the political tradition of the ‘Новая драма’ movement. Taken together, the works by these three playwrights demonstrate the continued capacity of specifically written drama as a form of theatre to reflect on and question the social and political order of the world around it.

Человек из Подольска

Dmitrii Danilov’s *Человек из Подольска* is one of the most successful new works of Russian drama in recent years. It premiered at Teatr.doc on 25 May 2017, and was followed by productions in theatres across Russia and abroad: besides Moscow, there have been productions in Noril’sk, Sterlitamak, Iaroslavl’, Kostroma, Omsk, Ioshkar-Ola, Sarov, Krasnoiarsk, Samara, and Irkutsk, as well as in Minsk and

⁸ ‘Одна из основных задач «новой драмы» – снятие табу’. Marina Davydova, in Eduard Boiakov, Marina Davydova and Daniil Dondurei, ‘Nuzhny novye formy, novye formy nuzhny?’ *Iskusstvo kino*, 2 (2004), 18-31 (p. 28).

Berlin.⁹ In a period when relatively few new writers have made it on to the stages of state-funded theatres – and when new works are staged they are predominantly by the established names of ‘Новая драма’ from the previous decade – Danilov’s theatrical debut stands out. Danilov is not a new name, however – he was already an established writer and poet, twice nominated for the Russian national literature prize ‘Большая книга’, and subsequently the recipient in 2019 of the prestigious Andrei Bely Prize. Whilst Danilov’s debut play may have taken the theatre world by storm, it was accused by some who were familiar with his literary output of repeating the same ideas.¹⁰ Nonetheless, Danilov’s receipt of the Golden Mask for the best work by a dramatist in 2018, in what was only the second year of this category’s existence, was a major achievement for a debut play, especially given that it was a Teatr.doc production.¹¹

How to explain this surprising mainstream success, then, of a work associated with the marginalized Teatr.doc, in regional state theatres not known for experimentation and risk-taking? On first appearance, this is a play about police violence and the arbitrary abuse of power, so how is it that the staging of the play was even covered by the state-controlled TV network Rossiia in some of its regional news broadcasts?¹² It would seem that the deep ambiguity of Danilov’s play allows for it to be read in a number of different ways. Whilst the liberal, opposition-inclined audience

⁹ This list does not include rehearsed readings, of which there have been many in other theatres in cities across Russia.

¹⁰ See Sergei Morozov, ‘Prinuzhdenie k prekrasnomu. O p’ese Dmitriia Danilova “Chelovek iz Podol’ska”’, *Pravda-info*, 29 January 2017 <<http://www.pravda.info/society/151638.html>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

¹¹ The category is officially called ‘Драма/работа драматурга’. It was first awarded in 2017, and is the only category in the festival that rewards stage writing of any description. The lists of past recipients can be found on the Golden Mask website: <<https://www.goldenmask.ru>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

¹² This included coverage of the productions at the Marii El theatre in Ioshkar-Ola and at the Novaia Drama theatre in Irkutsk. The production in Minsk at the Molodezhnyi Teatr was also covered by the tightly-controlled state TV channel Belarus’-1.

of Teatr.doc may see a play reflecting the violence of the modern police state that Russia has become in their eyes, it can also be viewed from another angle as an advert for the anti-Western patriotic-educational programme of the Ministry of Culture. Danilov's refusal to take a position regarding the psychological violence and brainwashing that takes place in the text could be equated with the tradition of the 'zero position' promoted by the architects of the 'Новая драма' movement, chief amongst whom was the play's director, Mikhail Ugarov. *Человек из Подольска* was one of the biggest hits for Teatr.doc in recent years. Since its premiere, it has been one of the most regularly performed plays in the repertoire, consistently drawing large audience numbers, including those who would not usually attend Teatr.doc productions. This has provided an essential source of revenue for the unsubsidized theatre in what has been the most challenging period in its history, especially since the passing of its founders. However, the dual fact of the production being awarded a Golden Mask and the proliferation of the play throughout regional state theatres is evidence to suggest that this is one of Teatr.doc's safest works of the troubled post-2012 period. Not only is the play evidently on the safe list, but it is also perhaps seen as promoting the correct cultural values as espoused by the Ministry of Culture since the development of the 'новая модель культурной политики'. This much is suggested by the framing of the play on the state TV channels in their coverage of it, where the message of the play is portrayed as anti-Western, anti-cosmopolitan and patriotic.¹³

¹³ Clips of this coverage can be found on YouTube. See, for example: GTRK Marii El, *ART-Mari – Prem'era spektaklia "Chelovek iz Podol'ska"*, online video recording, YouTube, 28 February 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOznoH9_CGk> [accessed 23 December 2020]; Vesti Irkutsk, *Karaoke prem'era V Irkutске postavili spektakl' "Chelovek iz Podol'ska"*, online video recording, YouTube, 23 March 2018, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZoPcGPLWYA>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

One way perhaps to understand the readiness of the authorities and those acting in their interests to embrace Danilov's play is to look at the structure of the text, which essentially follows the Socialist Realist artistic model. It includes the tropes of the 'path to consciousness' and the 'new (post-)Soviet man', as well as a play on the notion of 'engineers of human souls'. It promotes a re-evaluation of beauty through a violently enforced re-education programme, carried out by the police upon an ordinary citizen who has committed no crime other than that of thought. What on paper could be an Orwellian dystopian critique, in Danilov's work becomes a highly ambiguous reflection on the subjective nature of beauty and knowledge. It attempts to level out the hierarchy of beauty that traditionally favours the achievements of Western European culture over its Russian counterpart. The argument goes that there is nothing more or less beautiful, only different kinds of beauty. In this line of logic, the suburban industrial town of Podol'sk is no less beautiful than Amsterdam; one need only look with the right eyes. Thus, in addition to the devices of Socialist Realism in the text, there is also a Socialist Realist aesthetics here too, in which the world around should not be seen for what it is, but rather for what it is in the process of becoming.

The drama is in one act, and takes as its premise the commonplace occurrence in today's Russia of a young man being taken in by the police for interrogation without any pretext for doing so or explanation why. At the end of the play, the audience is left to argue over the arbitrary application of state power, the absurdity of 'полицейская логика' (the play's driving force), and whether Nikolai, the eponymous man from Podol'sk, is better or worse off as a result of the police interrogation when he is eventually set free at the end. Arguably, the ending is almost a positive one, with Nikolai seemingly having benefited from his incarceration

process. As one reviewer noted, the ending is ‘almost happy’.¹⁴ The Socialist Realist ‘character reformation’ trope is executed so convincingly by Danilov that the apparent dystopian irony in the text eventually gives way to an uneasy sincerity. Danilov is known for promoting the beauty of the mundane and the overlooked in his writing – the sunset over an industrial zone, for example.¹⁵ The aesthetics of decay has a rich history in art at least since Romanticism, and is not under dispute. However, a contradiction arises when the promotion of such beauty is placed in conjunction with psychological violence and brainwashing by the police as a means to an end. The result can be interpreted as an argument in favour of the forced re-education of citizens who think and see differently to the regime. What that leads to in practice is, for example, the Soviet experience of the Gulag, and, in our time, the Xinjiang re-education camps for the Uighurs in China. As with Soviet-era Socialist Realism and the ideology of the Gulag, the body of the individual is the centre of attention in Danilov’s play: it must be disassembled and reassembled by the police according to the ‘correct’ values of state ideology. As such, body politics is an integral feature of the discourse upon which the drama unfolds.

The play is set in an ‘ordinary Moscow police station’, with only five characters – the man from Podol’sk, a man from Mytishchi, two policemen and a policewoman. The action opens with Nikolai, the man from Podol’sk, asking questions as to why he has been brought in on no apparent pretext, whilst the First Policeman fills out a report. The questions very quickly turn on Nikolai, and the seeming absurdity of the situation emerges, satisfying the viewer’s desire to see ironic critique of the authorities and the arbitrary use of power by the notoriously corrupt

¹⁴ ‘Человека из Подольска ждет почти счастливый финал’. See Tat’iana Rat’kina, ‘Puteshestvie iz Podol’ska v Moskvu’, *Chastnyi Korrespondent*, 30 June 2017 <http://www.chaskor.ru/article/puteshestvie_iz_podolska_v_moskvu_42134> [accessed 23 December 2020].

¹⁵ Morozov.

and brutal Russian police force. However, over the course of the narrative, the ‘policeman’ archetype in Russian popular culture (stupid, brutal, corrupt, bandit), is steadily eroded. Much to the astonishment of Nikolai, who fancies himself as an underappreciated musician whose talent is wasted in his hometown, the police officers show themselves to be well-versed in high culture and progressive sub-culture alike – including, for example, references to both Mozart and to the cult German industrial-noise band, Einsturzende Neubauten. Interrogation sequences built on comically absurd general knowledge questions about Nikolai’s hometown of Podol’sk – such as its population and founding year – (all of which he fails) set up the crux of the play, which is that Nikolai is guilty of living his life ‘на автомате’. In a moment of extreme anthropocentrism – which in fact runs through the play as a whole, in its obsession with exclusively manmade beauty – the policeman equates Nikolai’s automaton existence with animal life, apparently assuming to know the experience of being an animal: ‘Ты живешь совершенно на автомате. [...] Ты фактически живешь как животное. Понимаешь? Ты – животное’.¹⁶ It is at this point that the narrative pivots its critique away from authority, towards the individual instead, and by extension to the spectator, who is indirectly accused of living ‘на автомате’ if they have ever considered the lower living standards in suburban or regional Russia to be less attractive than those in Moscow, St Petersburg, or other European capitals.¹⁷ There is a discernible Socialist Realist ‘path to consciousness’ trope here, which is foreshadowed in the declaration near the beginning of the text by the First Policeman to Nikolai: ‘Ничего, будем с вами работать, будем вас

¹⁶ This equation of the automaton with the animal strongly echoes Descartes, who controversially claimed that animals are automata, and live without consciousness. For a discussion of this, see *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, ed. by T. Regan and P. Singer, 2nd edn (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), pp. 13-19.

¹⁷ It is worth noting that Danilov himself was born and lives in Moscow.

развивать’.¹⁸ Likewise, in the same breath he states in reference to the Man from Mytishchi: ‘Встал на путь становления более или менее сознательным человеком’.¹⁹ This trope of the path to consciousness is used to justify the Chekist ideology at the core of the play, where ‘полицейская логика’ reigns and psychological violence is a necessary means to an end – the re-education of the citizen, in this case Nikolai, which is positively framed as being to his ultimate benefit.

On one level, what takes place inside the police station between Nikolai and the police officers is a power game of language and gesture. There is a series of initial linguistic skirmishes, in which the power of the acting authorities to determine the rules of the language game being played with the detainee is asserted. Here we see the first instance of what in performance theory Judith Butler terms as ‘when gesture becomes event’.²⁰ In the following passage, Nikolai has just called the proceedings in the police station thus far ‘absurd’:

Первый полицейский встает, снимает с вешалки висящую на ней резиновую дубинку, подходит к Человеку из Подольска.

ЧЕЛОВЕК ИЗ ПОДОЛЬСКА: *(В ужасе)* Нет! Не надо! *(закрывает голову руками)*

ПЕРВЫЙ ПОЛИЦЕЙСКИЙ: Сиди тихо.

С этого момента Первый полицейский обращается к Человеку из Подольска только на «ты». Несильно бьет Человека из Подольска дубинкой по плечу.

¹⁸ Danilov.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ This term is taken from Judith Butler’s keynote speech at a conference titled ‘Theater, Performance, Philosophy’ at the Sorbonne in 2014. See Labo LAPS, *TPP2014: When Gesture Becomes Event*, online video recording, YouTube, 11 October 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuAMRxSH--s>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

ЧЕЛОВЕК ИЗ ПОДОЛЬСКА: Ай! А!.. Вы что?! Не надо!

ПЕРВЫЙ ПОЛИЦЕЙСКИЙ: Не любишь абсурд?

ЧЕЛОВЕК ИЗ ПОДОЛЬСКА: Н-нет... Не...

Первый полицейский несильно бьет Человека из Подольска дубинкой по плечу.

ПЕРВЫЙ ПОЛИЦЕЙСКИЙ: Любишь, когда все понятно, логично, как положено? По правилам?

ЧЕЛОВЕК ИЗ ПОДОЛЬСКА: *(плачущим голосом и одновременно с вызовом)* Да! Да, я люблю, когда логично и понятно, когда я понимаю, что происходит, за что меня задержали, я хочу понимать... Я...²¹

Nikolai's desire to understand the situation is denied to him until the end of the play, once his re-education is more or less complete. What takes place up until that point, however, is the gradual disassembling of his ability to comprehend language usage through techniques of violent psychological coercion and pressure. In the quote above, we see the police baton being wielded over the man from Podol'sk. In the threat of violence represented by the baton, the policeman asserts his position of power and dominance over the defenceless citizen. The reaction of the character being threatened is as we might expect – he cries out before he has even been touched, and as such his body has been violated in advance of any physical contact. He has felt the pain pre-emptively. The baton does not need to make physical contact – its work is done through the psychological violence of the gesture. The two gentle taps of the baton on the shoulder then inscribe this gestural violence on to the body of the subject. This is an important part of the process of disassembling Nikolai's subjectivity – his knowledge and perception of himself as he exists in the world – in

²¹ Danilov.

order subsequently to reassemble it in the image of the police consensus, which is to say, in the image of the High Putinist utopia where Podol'sk is beautiful and perfect just as it is.

According to Beumers and Lipovetsky, the 'ritual' is an integral part of the aesthetics of 'Новая драма'.²² They link this to what they perceive as a 'discourse of violence' that is characteristic of the 'Новая драма' movement.²³ Although their thesis about violence as the dominant theatrical mode has been contested, in relation to Danilov's text it holds more true than for others.²⁴ Channelling the anthropologist Victor Turner, the authors state that the modern ritual is 'designed to restore and recreate sacral meanings and corresponding psychological conditions in concrete social and cultural circumstances'.²⁵ The ritual thus defined becomes a key mechanism in the forced re-education of Nikolai – he is made to repeat multiple series of meaningless sounds and body movements, which, it is claimed, 'способствуют образованию новых нейронных связей'.²⁶ In other words, ritual repetition of sounds and gestures functions as an important brainwashing mechanism in the text, enacting the transformation required for Nikolai's path to 'correct' consciousness. In the following passage, we see the first appearance of the ritual song-dance that serves this performative-inscriptive purpose:

ПЕРВЫЙ ПОЛИЦЕЙСКИЙ: [...] Это такой наш специальный полицейский танец для развития мозга. Необычные движения и произнесение трудных звуко сочетаний способствуют образованию

²² Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009), pp. 39-43.

²³ Ibid., p. 43.

²⁴ For a contestation of Beumers and Lipovetsky's thesis, see Kristina Matvienko, 'Putevoditel' po zabluzhdeniyam i otkrytiyam', *Oktiabr'*, 2 (2013) <<https://magazines.gorky.media/october/2013/2/putevoditel-po-zabluzhdeniyam-i-otkrytiyam.html>> [accessed 20 December 2020].

²⁵ Beumers and Lipovetsky, p. 41.

²⁶ Danilov.

новых нейронных связей. Тебе мозг надо развивать! Мыслительные способности! Гибкость ума! А то к сороковнику совсем в ментального старичка превратишься! Смотри, движения вот такие. Давай одну руку, и другую, вот так.

Первый полицейский и Человек из Подольска сцепляются руками, стоя боком друг к другу, и перемещаются приставным шагом.

Да, да, вот так. Ногу сюда, да, вот так. А текст вот такой, запоминай. Для начала – самый простой вариант.

Ай, лёлэ лёлэ лёлэ

Ай, лёлэ лёлэ лёлэ

Ай, лёлэ лёлэ лёлэ

Хей! Хей! Лёлэ лёлэ.

Понял? Все просто. Главное – четко выговаривать гласные. Давай, повтори.

ЧЕЛОВЕК ИЗ ПОДОЛЬСКА: *(с блеющей интонацией)* Ай, лёли лёли лёли...

ПЕРВЫЙ ПОЛИЦЕЙСКИЙ: Не лёли, а лёлэ! Не надо мне тут свои айлюли разводить! Четко говори! Лё и лэ. Лёлэ.²⁷

Nikolai's subsequent failure to master the rules of the game – to repeat and mimic exactly as told – works to further deprive him of his ability to understand and respond appropriately to language usage. This psychological torture through oppressive domination and manipulation of the order of things – in this case, the conventions of language usage – ensures that Nikolai's power of self-determination is gradually transferred to the interrogators. Once Nikolai eventually performs the song-dance routine correctly – bearing in mind that this is only the 'самый простой вариант' and

²⁷ Ibid.

more challenging exercises are still to come – he is praised for his achievement by the police officers, a praise which he accepts willingly, because by this stage, his sense of perception and of his own identity has been broken down sufficiently that the creation of ‘новые нейронные связи’, as referred to by the First Policeman, can take place with little resistance. The creation of ‘новые нейронные связи’ is an important part of the re-education process, demonstrating the power of the ritual act to both erase and write simultaneously, which is to say, to overwrite. However, given that subjectivity is never static, always moving with time itself in an ongoing process of erasure and inscription, it is perhaps not unsurprising that the ritual has the power to ‘restore and recreate sacral meanings and corresponding psychological conditions’ (Beumers and Lipovetsky), as it concentrates and intensifies these moments of overwriting in the event. The importance of ritual-as-event, used in *Человек из Подольска* as a literary device, is undoubtedly one of the defining features of ‘Новая драма’ and contemporary Russian theatre more generally.

In the world of Danilov’s text – the generic Moscow police station, where ‘полицейская логика’ is the order of things – we see the coordinates, which is to say, the norms and limits, of a totalitarian system. To quote Slavoj Žižek:

Totalitarian ideology [...] is no longer meant, even by its authors, to be taken seriously – its status is just that of a means of manipulation, purely external and instrumental; its rule is secured not by its truth-value but by simple extra-ideological violence and promise of gain.²⁸

The fact that *Человек из Подольска* is seen as both absurdist and realist, as a dystopian and yet all-too-real reflection of contemporary Russian reality, is indicative of social and political trends more broadly. The instrumentalization of violence in the re-education of Nikolai inside the police station reveals the totalitarian ideology that

²⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989; repr. 2008), p. 27.

underpins ‘полицейская логика’, which does not aspire to be taken seriously; it only demands that the rules of the game it sets out are accepted as the unchallenged order of things. As such, when the questioning process resumes after the ritual dance-song seen above, Nikolai finds that he is unable to answer simple questions that ordinarily would be perceived and understood unambiguously by a native-speaking language user. The breakdown of Nikolai’s ability to understand simple language usage demonstrates his disempowerment from the symbolic order, which concomitantly means his total subjection to it. We see this illustrated in the following short extract:

ПЕРВЫЙ ПОЛИЦЕЙСКИЙ: А как ты едешь [на работу]?

ЧЕЛОВЕК ИЗ ПОДОЛЬСКА: В каком смысле?

ПЕРВЫЙ ПОЛИЦЕЙСКИЙ: Ну вот что ты сейчас спросил? Что значит «в каком смысле»? Я задал однозначный вопрос: как ты едешь на работу. Зачем ты спрашиваешь, в каком смысле? Что ты хочешь от меня услышать в ответ? В философском смысле? Психологическом? Биологическом? Просто: расскажи как ты едешь на работу. На автобусе, на электричке, на чем еще?²⁹

The fact that Nikolai cannot answer this ‘однозначный вопрос’ without a thorough breakdown of exactly what is really meant by the question reveals the extent to which his ownership of language has been taken from him by the interrogation process. It also separately demonstrates how in the totalitarian world of the police station, the inherent polysemy of language is inadmissible – language usage and speech can only be ‘однозначный’, and as such it becomes an instrument of violence. Similar instances of Nikolai’s inability to comprehend the rules of the game being played during the interrogation recur on a number of occasions, as an integral part of the process of his submission to the will of authority and corresponding re-education in

²⁹ Danilov.

line with the police consensus. The ritual dance-song seen above is enacted on two occasions subsequently: the first is a long scene with multiple tasks, where a great deal of coercion and violent threats are involved, but again Nikolai submits in the end and eventually performs each task successfully; the second occasion is the final scene of the play, when Nikolai in tandem with the police officers performs a variation of the ritual willingly, with enthusiasm, and in harmony with the others. This resolution of the antagonism that has motivated the drama up to that point in the play, and the emergence of a utopian-totalitarian consensus in its place, signifies the total submission of the protagonist to the will of power, which is a necessary requirement for the conflict-less consensus to emerge. The subject has been successfully re-educated, at least for the time being.

Before the resolution of the conflict, however, Nikolai must first be made to understand why all this has happened to him, why he was picked off the street for no apparent reason and subjected to a violent re-education process by the police. They do this by revealing to Nikolai the report that has been written about him, in which, as mentioned earlier, he is described as living ‘как животное’ and ‘на автомате’. This is in contrast to the all-too-human police themselves, one of whom states at the end of the play, ‘Мы ж не звери какие’.³⁰ Nikolai’s perception of the world and his place in it has been broken to the extent that he accepts the charges made against him and signs the report, thereby inscribing his reformed self into a text within the text. The report describes his crime as follows:

Живет как автомат... не любит, презирает свой город и его жителей...
 изо дня в день бессознательно совершает одни и те же действия... не
 осознает себя... не видит вокруг себя ничего красивого и интересного...

³⁰ Ibid.

не воспринимает протекающую вокруг Реальность... не уважает
Реальность...³¹

Its contents come as a revelation to Nikolai, when by contrast if he had been presented with such accusations at the beginning of the interrogation, it is fair to assume that he would have vigorously rejected them, and certainly not signed his acceptance in writing. When Nikolai enquires as to why ‘Реальность’ is written with a capital letter, the policeman replies, ‘По нашим инструкциям так положено’.³² This is indicative of the violent, monosemic order of the police consensus, in which there can only be one Reality, controlled and determined by the ruling power. This is a totalitarian semantic realm in which the polysemy of abstract concepts is closed down and instrumentalized – subjective truths become Truth, subjective realities become Reality, much as there is only one version of ‘history’ in the new state cultural policy and one ‘traditional’ sexuality in the law. In the world of ‘полицейская логика’, there is no room for alternate truths or competing narratives. In this world, individual subjectivity is circumscribed by the limits of the monosemic ideology of power, which is violently enforced and policed.

Человек из Подольска ends with Nikolai’s release from the police station, after he has signed his self-denunciation. The latter is a typical totalitarian-Chekest technique of power, exemplified by the Stalinist purges of the 1930s and re-appearing in recent times in high-profile so-called ‘terrorism’ cases where detainees are tortured into giving false confessions, as seen in *Война близко* and *Пытки* from Chapter One. Nikolai reacts with indifference to being told that this will not be his last visit to the police station and that he will, from now on, be detained often: ‘Мы теперь будем

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

часто вас задерживать,' they cheerily inform him.³³ His acceptance of this new state of affairs is the manifestation of his reformed, re-educated self, broken by the interrogation process. Furthermore, he is told that he will be detained 'когда надо будет', so in other words, at any time, indiscriminately.³⁴ As such, Nikolai may have been set free from the police station, but he is now shackled by the oppressive weight of police surveillance and potential arrest, which is a powerful mechanism and driver of self-censorship. For Foucault, writing in the 1970s, surveillance was a textbook mechanism of power over the individual body subjected to its normalizing regimes.³⁵ Half a century later, in the era of digital technology, CCTV, big data, and 'surveillance capitalism' more generally, the surveillance regimes have reached an entirely new level of complexity and penetration into our lives. For the man from Podol'sk, therefore, as for us all now in the third decade of the twenty-first century, the shadow of total surveillance is an inescapable reality of modern life, meaning that the psychological violence of Nikolai's re-education asserts its pervasive presence on his life long after the end of the play.

The message in *Человек из Подольска* is that we should see beauty in the world immediately around us, rather than fetishizing other places. This is a noble idea in theory, but in practice it serves as an apology for social, political and economic failings, the material consequences of which should not necessarily be glorified as beautiful in their own way. We see the traces of 'capitalist realist' ideology here, in which structural inequality and stratified wealth distribution are accepted as the natural order of things. To claim parity between Amsterdam and Podol'sk is to ignore the socio-economic factors behind the respective infrastructure of these two very

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Allan Lane, 1977; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), pp. 170-77.

different cities, and it is to accept the ideology of High Putinism, which would have it that life for ordinary people in postindustrial Russia is qualitatively no worse than in Western Europe, or in the Russian capital for that matter. As one reviewer of Danilov's play noted, 'Примирение с очарованием честной бедности – повод к невыплатам зарплат в целях сохранения эстетического феномена'.³⁶ Far from eradicating an arbitrary, culturally constructed hierarchy of beauty, Danilov merely replaces one hierarchy with another, founded on 'честная бедность', the eradication of antagonism, and blind acceptance of the status quo laid out by the state and patrolled by the organs of state power. What we learn about 'полицейская логика' from this play is that it is inherently Chekist, and if left unchecked its logical end point is citizen re-education programmes, in regional police branches or internment camps.

The fact that Danilov refrains from taking a position on proceedings leaves the play open-ended and ambiguously framed. As such, it was open to interpretation by the state media, who saw it as fitting the patriotic programme of the Ministry of Culture. The heavy saturation of the text with a knowing irony – perhaps even 'среб' – does not fundamentally change this. Perhaps the 'zero position' is less effective as a device in theatre making now, compared to the heyday of 'Новая драма' when it was in vogue. Perhaps this is the new reality of the 'другая Россия' referred to by Zaudinova above. What follows in this chapter are two plays that take an active 'post-zero' position, on two different issues relating to body politics. They do not accept the normative regime of the High Putinist consensus, but rather demonstrate 'dissensus' – different ways of thinking, doing, and seeing – that correspondingly give rise to the possibility of alternative subjectivities.

³⁶ Morozov.

Философы, или Великая оргия

This play, by Valerii Pecheikin, is the only work considered in depth in this thesis that has never been ‘staged’ as such (whether on an actual theatre stage or otherwise).³⁷ Each year, the Liubimovka Festival has three categories – the main competition (for young, up-and-coming playwrights), the out-of-competition programme (showcasing new work by established writers), and the fringe programme (for short or experimental texts). Pecheikin’s play originated from an invitation to submit a play for the out-of-competition programme at the 2016 edition of the festival, which that year was curated by Elena Koval’skaia, art-director of the Meyerhold Centre. The play was presented as a rehearsed reading, directed by Talgat Batalov, and was the closing event of that year’s festival.³⁸ In March of the following year, there was another rehearsed reading of the play, directed by German Grekov, at Teatr 18+ in Rostov-on-Don.³⁹ Given the extensive depictions of nudity and sex (both hetero and homo), it is perhaps unsurprising that Pecheikin’s text has yet to be staged. However, in an interview I conducted with Pecheikin, he stressed that he wrote the play for live performance, not as standalone text or rehearsed reading. The dramatist believes that *Философы, или Великая оргия* (henceforth *Философы*) can be staged in present-day Russia, and that someone with a big enough name need only try. He

³⁷ This is true at the time of writing in late 2020, and the situation seems unlikely to change any time soon.

³⁸ The performance is available on YouTube. See: Festival’ Liubimovka, *Filosofy – Valerii Pecheikin*, online video recording, YouTube, 11 October 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lQFr2ae6FS4>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

³⁹ This performance is also available on YouTube. See: Ksenia Protosevich, *Filosofy. Chitka. Teatr 18+*, online video recording, YouTube, 27 March 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhbD-90Pe1Y>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

cites the recent production of his earlier play *Боженька* at the Gogol Centre by the famous actor Nikita Kukushkin (written in 2015; premiered in 2019), as well as the decision by Konstantin Bogomolov to commission an adaptation of *Норма*, Vladimir Sorokin's infamous debut novel about a faeces-eating Soviet society, for the stage of his Teatr na Maloi Bronnoi (premiered in 2019; directed by Maksim Didenko, adapted by Valerii Pecheikin). He says in this regard:

Пьесу «Философы» поставить сегодня можно. Просто, как сказать, кто-то должен взять на себя ответственность. Богомоллов взял на себя ответственность и убедил всех, что это безопасно. Потому что у меня просто нет статуса, я не могу взять на себя ответственность. Вот. Как только мне позволят это сделать, я смогу сказать: «Она безопасна».⁴⁰

Pecheikin rightly points out that the boundaries of permissibility in contemporary Russia are in practice largely precedent-based, rather than determined by the letter of the law. As outlined in the introduction, even where specific laws exist, they are often ill-defined, vague, and arbitrarily enforced. As such, no one can be sure what is and is not permissible until it has been tried and tested, and even then the reaction often depends on whether or not it gets noticed. He also claims that his text is not a provocation of the authorities:

Провокацией может быть только действие власти, потому что сегодня власть выступает как главный провокатор. Она очень сильно укрупняет такие вещи, которые можно просто не заметить, не увидеть. Она замечает их выборочно. Она их выбирает для того, чтобы заявить о своей, в том числе, позиции. Если она запрещает Печейкина и пьесу «Философы», то она дает сигнал всем остальным печейкиным в России и всем тем, кто хочет писать и ставить такие пьесы. Но это можно выяснить, только попробовав.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Valerii Pecheikin, Unpublished interview with author, Moscow, 2019.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Given that this work has not received a full stage production at the time of writing, and with no prospect of this in sight, there will naturally be more of an emphasis placed on the text itself in my analysis. The rehearsed readings do not offer significant insights into what a staging of *Философы* might look like, although they do perhaps offer preliminary indications of audience reaction, as well as demonstrating the living quality of the language and the inherently performative, dramatic nature of the text. It is worth noting Pecheikin's apathy towards the rehearsed reading as a form (whilst separately acknowledging its importance for young directors and writers):

Это не так интересно. Меня больше интересует мультимедийный жанр, меня интересует видео, его создание. Но читка, – нет. [...] Она очень невизуальная, для меня сейчас важно визуальное. Для меня в читке нет ничего визуального.⁴²

The dramatist's interest in visuality can be seen in his work for Serebrennikov at the Gogol Centre, such as *Кафка* (premiered in 2016), and his directorial debut film *Perversex* (2017). Nonetheless, Pecheikin's plays lend themselves well to oral/aural performance, as evidenced by the success of his works over many years at the Liubimovka Festival. When I asked him how he conceived of the possibility of staging *Философы*, especially in regard to the sex scenes, he replied that they would have to be real for the play to work at all on stage, and that this would most likely have to be done using pre-recorded video, because of the impracticality and unwillingness of actors to perform the scenes live on stage repeatedly.⁴³ On the one hand, it is now common practice to incorporate video into live performance on stage, so this would be a realistic solution to the problem. On the other hand, it would

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ 'Для того, чтобы этот текст по-настоящему заработал, артисты должны по-настоящему заниматься сексом, но это невозможно в театре, это возможно только в кино. Я бы, наверное, использовал реальных людей, которые занимались бы настоящим сексом, снимал бы на видео и использовал бы это в спектакле.' Ibid.

somewhat negate the live-event quality of the performance, which ironically is something that the rehearsed reading as a genre has in abundance.

The full title of the play – *Философы, или Великая оргия* – is a parody of the Enlightenment tradition of giving great works long names with alternate titles, joined by the conjunction ‘or’. The use of this naming tradition was usually intended to lend a work stature or importance, or to signify the author’s intent that the work be considered as such. The fact that the alternate title is ‘Великая оргия’ automatically undermines the weightiness that usually accompanies this device, thus parodying the form through the content. The reading of the full name of the play at the Liubimovka Festival immediately drew laughter from the audience, setting the tone for what was to come. The title signals the intent for the work as a whole, and already marks it out as unstageable for state theatres. Even at the Liubimovka and in subsequent writing about the play, it was never referred to by its full name, being abbreviated from the outset to merely *Философы*, as if the uncomfortable alternative title did not exist at all.⁴⁴ The irony is that it is precisely this kind of prudishness that Pecheikin rails against in the play, thus affirming the extent of the problem that *Философы* addresses.

The origins of the play are to be found in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Дар* (1938), Pecheikin claims:

У Набокова в романе «Дар» есть сцена, где герои читают пьесу про Древнюю Грецию, и там идёт разговор между проститутками, которые описывают философов как своих клиентов. И одна говорит, что мой

⁴⁴ See the Liubimovka website and YouTube channel, as well as internet blog posts by viewers, such as for example: Mikael’ Desse, ‘Smeshnaia, zlaia i vysokaia’, *Dystopia.me*, <<https://dystopia.me/smeshnaya-zlaya-i-vysokaya>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

КЛИЕНТ СЧИТАЕТ, ЧТО ВСЕ В ЭТОМ МИРЕ – МАТЕРИЯ. [...] То есть идею я украл у Набокова.⁴⁵

Referential derivation of this kind is inherent to art and culture, and theatre is no exception (e.g. Tom Stoppard's 1966 classic *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, derived from two minor characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*). Pecheikin makes the connection to Nabokov explicit in the epigraph to the play: 'Цитата из Набокова. Владимир Набоков'.⁴⁶ This ironic meta-epigraph also drew laughter from the audiences at both rehearsed readings. In the reading in Rostov-on-Don, the narrator went so far as to request a Nabokov quote from the audience, which was duly supplied. It is worth noting that as well as Nabokov, there are comparisons to be made with other Russian Modernists, namely Daniil Kharms and Sigizmund Krzhizhanovskii. Of the latter's work, there are similarities with his 1929 one-act play *Диалог*, consisting of a dialogue between two philosophers, which is exactly how *Философы* starts. Another example is Krzhizhanovskii's three-act play *Смерть бросает кости* (1930), where the main character is Death; likewise in *Философы* the character of Death appears in personified form at the end of the play. In addition to these Russian authors, it is difficult to overlook the strong influence of Franz Kafka in Pecheikin's work in general.

Философы reflects on the subjective nature of truth, philosophical inquiry, and the difficulties of sex and sexuality. It is also a satire on consumerism, and contemporary culture more generally. There are two pairs of characters in *Философы* – Severin and Vanda, who are the pair of so-called 'philosophers', and Avgust and Maria, who are both 'prostitutes'. The philosopher-prostitute dynamic is a productive one, although any easy distinction between the two character types becomes

⁴⁵ Pecheikin, Unpublished interview.

⁴⁶ Pecheikin, *Filosofy*.

untenable, as the respective nature of each is interrogated. In his interview for the Liubimovka Festival in 2016, Pecheikin stated that the play is about how ‘ложный интеллект’ complicates sexual relations:

Я много лет наблюдаю, как трагически и безуспешно самые разные люди пытаются заняться сексом. Писать пьесу в духе «про отношения мужчины и женщины» — да гори оно все! Что там непонятного-то в этих отношениях? Я решил, что если писать, то об этом. О том, как «интеллектуалы» все усложняют. Для меня это, конечно, ложный интеллект.⁴⁷

This is not the full picture, however, because half of the sketches have nothing to do with sex at all – rather they are concerned with parodying the interview format that has come to dominate cultural and political discourse in recent years, popularised on daytime television and by video bloggers such as Iurii Dud'. There is also a criticism in the text of mindless consumption and the anti-intellectualism of unquestioning existence. In one scene, for example, the philosophers' discussion comes to the topic of death, and the prostitutes' reaction is indicative:

МАРИЯ: О чем они говорят?

АВГУСТ: Смерть... Что такое смерть, Мария?

МАРИЯ: Как? С-ме-рть? Не знаю. Наверное, какой-то товар. Судя по названию, довольно дешевый.

АВГУСТ: Эй, вы говорили что-то про смерть – что это и где такое берут?

СЕВЕРИН: Это не что. И это не берут.

⁴⁷ Pecheikin, quoted in Mila Deneva, 'V etu laboratorii vse nesut svoikh "gomunkulov"', *Liubimovka blog*, 10 September 2016 <<http://lubimovka.ru/blog/327-v-etu-laboratoriyu-vse-nesut-svoikh-gomunkulov>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

ВАНДА: Смерть наступает.

АВГУСТ: Наступает?

СЕВЕРИН: Приходит.

МАРИЯ: Если она приходит, то у нее есть ноги? Она носит колготки?⁴⁸

In the face of no solid evidence to the contrary, the two philosophers are comically forced to concede that as far as they are able to ascertain, death probably does wear tights. This kind of pseudo-intellectual enquiry *ad absurdum* provides much of the humour in the scenes, but it also clearly represents the opposition of two extremes – the ‘ложный интеллект’ of the philosophers and the anti-intellectualism of the prostitutes. The assumption of the latter that death must be some kind of cheap consumer product is indicative of a culture in which anything of any value is consumable. Death is parodically reified – falsely perceived as a concrete thing – which ironically turns out to be true when Death appears in human form at the denouement of the play.

The constant failure of communication between the two pairs of characters is a failure of language, and this becomes a source of epistemological enquiry in the text. In this case, Maria’s linguistically logical yet false deduction that this unknown thing ‘death’ must have legs and wear tights because it is a feminine noun (смерть) and is used with the verb of motion *приходить* leads to the absurd situation in which an abstract noun is then embodied with legs and wears tights. The subsequent appearance of embodied Death in the final scene – wearing tights – strikes mortal panic in the minds of the four interlocutors, and starts a chain of events that ends in the death of the two prostitutes shortly afterwards and the possible abandonment of philosophy by

⁴⁸ Pecheikin, *Filosofy*.

Vanda and Severin. On the one hand, there is a dialectical opposition in *Философы* that subjects both false intellectualism and anti-intellectualism to critical enquiry and thus exposes both for their inner contradictions and absurdities. On the other hand, ultimately it is the two prostitutes who die and the philosophers who survive, making this a didactic text in favour of the latter occupation. It is within this dialectical framework that the issues of gender and sexuality, predicated as they are on the individual body as a ‘biopolitical’ subject, arise in the text. For Michel Foucault, the body is integral to understanding power relations in modern society, stating:

Society’s control over individuals was accomplished not only through consciousness or ideology but also in the body and with the body. For capitalist society, it was biopolitics, the biological, the somatic, the corporeal that mattered more than anything else. The body is a biopolitical reality.⁴⁹

It is the ‘biopolitical reality’ of the body in contemporary Russian society that Pecheikin sets out to interrogate.

Философы is a parody of philosophical inquiry. Pecheikin uses the traditional philosophical form of the dialogue to drive logical reasoning into epistemological aporias. As much is acknowledged in the title of the first scene of the play – ‘Апория’. In Pecheikin’s own words, ‘весь текст – это отрицание’.⁵⁰ This device of ‘negation’ in the text creates a radical openness that resists any totalising enclosure by the normalising regimes of biopolitics. Judith Butler’s major thesis in her seminal work *Gender Trouble* was that gender is performative.⁵¹ According to her, gender is a social construct that is without essential origin. As a form of interpellation, gender performativity works to reinforce social hierarchies, such as patriarchy, in favour of

⁴⁹ See *Power: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol. 3, ed. by James D. Faubion, trans. by Robert Hurley and others (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 137.

⁵⁰ Pecheikin, Unpublished interview.

⁵¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London; New York: Routledge, 1990).

the status quo. We see evidence of this power dynamic in the first scene, where Severin (a man) asks Vanda (a woman) to identify herself (they have only just met, through a dating app):

СЕВЕРИН: Но кто же вы? Мужчина, женщина, тушканчик? Кто?

ВАНДА: Если я скажу, то окажусь в вашей власти, а пока вы в моей.⁵²

The implication here is that for Vanda to concede to such categorization would be automatically to place herself under the power of Severin. For Vanda to not commit to categorization at all is a source of empowerment – a sentiment that Butler would seem to agree with. This is a language game for symbolic power. For as long as Vanda can resist the imposition through language of a gender categorization that circumscribes her freedom to self-determination, she can hold the upper hand (or at least an equal hand) in her relations with people of the dominant sex, in this case Severin.

Building on the issue of gender power dynamics, there is an inquiry into the related question of gender difference, and the categorization of bodies as such (the latter of which the character of Vanda was seen resisting in the extract above from the first scene). About mid-way through the play, the prostitute Avgust arrives – he has been called to the scene by the two philosophers in his capacity as a ‘professional’, to help them successfully engage in sexual acts with each other, an activity that has thus far eluded them. The gulf that separates the philosophers from the prostitute in terms of language usage makes for insurmountable barriers of communication between them. The inability of the philosophers to comprehend basic communicative language without driving it into epistemological aporias prevents them from being able to make physical contact with each other. It is only the forceful intervention of the

⁵² Pecheikin, *Filosofy*.

misapprehending prostitute Avgust that overcomes the epistemological paralysis in the text and brings about physical contact between the characters. In the following extract, the issue of gender difference arises, whilst also demonstrating a case of miscommunication:

АВГУСТ: Я вижу, вы, господин, хотите, чтобы вас считали госпожей.

СЕВЕРИН: С чего вы взяли? Каким образом вы это увидели?

АВГУСТ: Вы хотите, чтобы я относился к вам как к мужчине или как к женщине?

СЕВЕРИН: А в чем разница?

АВГУСТ: Плюс пятьдесят евро. Хочешь?

СЕВЕРИН: Хочу? То есть имею волю хотеть?⁵³

Severin is interpreting Avgust's words philosophically, whilst Avgust is speaking and responding as a sex worker who is trying to understand the desires of his client. This kind of failure of language always leads to misunderstandings between the characters, most of which are of a sexual or scatological nature. In the exchange above, almost every question is answered with another question. Severin's querying of the existence of free will naturally goes over the head of his interlocutor, who responds instead by performing dominating sexual acts upon him, which he does not resist. The prostitute's actions bring about a philosophical revelation in Severin. It is the physicality of the prostitute's intervention that overcomes the two philosophers' former dialogic paralysis. In this way, gender difference (valued at 50 euros) is negated by unthinking action, rather than the inaction of thinking.

⁵³ Pecheikin, *Filosofy*.

It is with this in mind that we can interpret the philosophers' discovery of the existence of God through the transcendental power of sodomy. This realization is much to Vanda's astonishment, as she tells Severin: 'Бог есть [...] И бессмертие. И... добро. А зло... зло это недостаток добра'.⁵⁴ Vanda experiences this moment of sexual and spiritual awakening vicariously, whilst observing the two men from the side. Her evident pleasure as onlooker contrasts with her later displeasure at physical contact. This is reflective of a discourse of sexual difference, as outlined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her work *Epistemology of the Closet*. In 'Axiom 1: People are different from each other', she writes, 'Many people have their richest mental/emotional involvement with sexual acts that they don't do, or even don't want to do'.⁵⁵ Vanda does not want to engage physically in the act herself, but she nonetheless derives a transcendental sexual pleasure from observing the others. This blurring of the boundaries of individual bodies in favour of a discourse of difference is hinted at earlier on in the play, in the first scene, when Vanda asks Severin, 'А где граница, по которой вы отделяете меня от себя?'.⁵⁶ Severin replies, 'Это граница самой мысли'.⁵⁷ The 'граница самой мысли' is one that the two philosophers between themselves are unable to break beyond. It is only the physical intervention of the prostitute Avgust that enables the transgression. Thus, although the dialectic in *Философы* ultimately favours the philosophers over the prostitutes, there is one key respect in which the prostitutes make a positive intervention into the lives of the philosophers, bringing about the long sought-after sexual experience that until that point had eluded them. In this regard, there is a discourse of doing over thinking when it comes to questions of gender and sexuality in the play.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), p. 25. Italics in original.

⁵⁶ Pecheikin, *Filosofy*.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

The arrival of the second prostitute, Maria, signals a transition in the text from the dominance of thinking and thought – the logocentrism of the philosophers – to the other extreme, which is the carnal, corporeal, and biological world of the prostitutes. In language that is reminiscent of Vladimir Sorokin, Avgust describes to Maria how he ate his breakfast:

АВГУСТ: Я клал еду в рот и пережевывал пищу зубами, потом глотал. Откусывал новый кусок, пережевывал и глотал.

МАРИЯ: Ничего себе! Это захватывающая история!

АВГУСТ: А потом я сходил в туалет. Я вытолкнул из себя переваренную пищу – ту, которую я съел вчера.⁵⁸

The attention here on the physiological processes of the body serves to reinforce the opposition between the materiality of the prostitutes and the metaphysical disembodiedness of the philosophers. As in Sorokin, Pecheikin's writing of intensely material, carnal scenes of sodomy, fellatio, scatology, and general human bodily functions collectively serve a discursive function – that of the dialectic at the core of the text between doing and thinking. These scenes – which transgress various social norms and taboos – can be likened to what the scholar Mark Lipovetsky calls (in relation to Sorokin's work) 'carnalisation'.⁵⁹ Lipovetsky defines this as 'the discursive deployment of bodily gestures, which can be only partially described as the materialisation of metaphors'.⁶⁰ He outlines three types of 'carnalisation' – direct, indirect, and reverse. All three varieties can be traced in *Философы*. A variation of the first kind can be seen in the extract above, in which the materiality of the

⁵⁸ Pecheikin, *Filosofy*.

⁵⁹ See Mark Lipovetsky, 'Fleshing/Flashing the Discourse: Sorokin's Master Trope', in *Postmodern Crises: From Lolita to Pussy Riot* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2017), 109-29.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

prostitutes is viscerally literalized (deployment of bodily gestures). Examples of indirect carnalisation, which functions more on the level of discourse (materialisation of metaphors), include the aforementioned discovery of God, immortality and good through sodomy, as well as ‘nonexistence’ [небытие] through fellatio.⁶¹ To this we can add Maria’s act of defecation on to a pile of books, ostensibly because there is no toilet in Vanda’s ‘apartment’ where the stage action takes place.⁶² This symbolic violation of knowledge, as represented by the book, by the unthinking Maria is a manifestation of the clash of thinking and doing in the play. The third kind, reverse carnalisation, can be found in the closing scene, when the dead bodies of both prostitutes are lying on the floor and the two philosophers remain. Vanda asks Severin what to do with the corpses. He replies, ‘Обычно в таких случаях я роняю на тело книжный шкаф. Через некоторое время книги все впитывают’.⁶³ Leaving aside the questions raised here by the implication of a repeated action, this statement suggests a simultaneous process of disembodiment and materialisation. By transforming the characters from flesh into text in the form of books, the bodies themselves are literalised, but only to the extent that they are already only text. This is a reversal of the Biblical notion of ‘incarnation’ (which is itself synonymous with carnalisation), where instead of ‘The Word became flesh’ (John 1. 14), we see flesh become words. There is perhaps an eschatological concern here for life after death existing through and in text.

The image of the prostitutes’ corpses becoming re-embodied as books is a fittingly ironic ending for characters who represented anti-intellectualism and unthinking action. However, as Pecheikin makes clear, this ending was inevitable, for

⁶¹ Pecheikin, *Filosofy*.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

Философы is ultimately a didactic work about the victory of knowledge and thought over carnal existence and consumption:

Это же педагогическая пьеса. Это же морализаторская вещь.
Проститутки умирают, а философы нет. В конце концов, автор,
разумеется, на стороне философов.⁶⁴

Embodiment, disembodiment, and re-embodiment characterise Pecheikin's play, as processes of 'carnalisation' take place in both directions. This fluidity of somatic form troubles the notion of the body, as well as our understanding of what it is to be an embodied subject. Through the employment of negation, the discourse of *Философы* is resistant to normalizing regimes of body politics that would otherwise circumscribe individual subjectivity, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality.

In her moment of sexual-spiritual revelation, Vanda tries to describe the experience to Severin in words: 'Что-то твердое вошло в мое мягкое "Я". Какая-то трансцендентальная сущность'.⁶⁵ In this fleeting synthesis of the material and the transcendental, embodied in the first-person-singular letter 'Я', we see a preoccupation with a corporeal subjectivity that is also a defining feature of the next play considered in this chapter – Ol'ga Shiliaeva's *28 дней*. The politics of both plays are focused on the body, reflecting the extent to which the body continues to be a highly contested political site in contemporary Russian society. In the half century since Foucault's writing, the body is no less of a 'biopolitical reality' now than it was then. Given the recent legislative interventions that have seen the intensification of policymaking with the body as its focus – and the banishment of non-normative sexuality from the public realm – Pecheikin's play can be read as an artistic response to juridico-political shifts. The radically open body politics of *Философы*, which

⁶⁴ Pecheikin, Unpublished interview.

⁶⁵ Pecheikin, *Filosofy*.

promotes an individual subjectivity that is not circumscribed by pre-determined categories or normative regimes, is a direct challenge to the rigid binaries of prevailing gender and sexual politics in High Putinist Russia.

28 дней

28 дней first saw the light of day as a rehearsed reading, when it took the 2018 Liubimovka Festival by storm. For some in the audience, it was difficult to believe that this work by young psychologist Ol'ga Shiliaeva from St Petersburg was a theatrical debut, such was the strength and maturity of the writing. Modelled on a Greek tragedy, the play effectively utilised a highly formal structure to explore a topic of present and universal significance – the menstrual cycle, along with all of the associated social, cultural, and political issues that it invokes. Shiliaeva's debut was subsequently awarded the Brewhouse Stage Prize, to bring the play to the stage of Teatr.doc. The co-directors of the rehearsed reading, Iurii Muravitskii and Svetlana Mikhailishcheva, stayed on as directors to adapt the text for full stage performance, along with the same group of actors, who were the graduating year of Muravitskii and Mikhailishcheva's acting course at the Moscow School of New Cinema. Due to the fact that Teatr.doc had no permanent space at the time, having been evicted from Malyi Kazennyi pereulok the previous September and still being in search of a new permanent home, the production premiered at NOL Project in the south west of Moscow on 30 January 2019.⁶⁶ Once Teatr.doc established itself on Sadovnicheskaia

⁶⁶ NOL Project was an experimental theatre platform led by Il'ia Romashko from the Gogol Centre that existed for a year and a half inside Mozaika, a large shopping mall in the

naberezhnaia (named ‘DOC na ostrove’) the following spring, all subsequent performances of the play took place there.

Such was the impact of the production on the Moscow theatre scene that it was nominated for Golden Masks in three categories: best small-form drama; best director; and best dramatist. Following on from Dmitrii Danilov’s win in the previous year, Shiliaeva’s nomination for her debut work on a taboo subject that polarized audiences and critics was no less of an achievement. Muravitskii and Mikhailishcheva’s staging of the play also divided opinion, so any discussion of the success of the work must include the directorial decisions and various discussions that went on around the transformation of the text from rehearsed reading to full stage production. Considering the text, the stage adaptation, and the critical reactions simultaneously, a picture will emerge of a work that engages with body politics, which is an integral feature of the landscape of High Putinism and its dominant discourses of patriarchy and tradition. As a work of drama, it demonstrates the continued capacity of the genre for an active politics, and shows the possibilities for feminist drama, free from ‘phallogocentric’ regimes of normative forms and processes.⁶⁷

Shiliaeva chose to subtitle her play ‘трагедия менструального цикла’. Affirming the genre of the work as tragedy, the *dramatis personae* consists of three characters – She [Она], Chorus [Хор женщин], and Male Voice [мужской голос]. It is made immediately apparent that Shiliaeva is employing a Classical Greek tragic form, with a dialectical arrangement of protagonist-antagonist-chorus. This form of

Dubrovka region of south west Moscow. The name appears to refer to the ‘ноль-позиция’ of the ‘Новая драма’ movement. NOL Project ceased operation in March 2020.

⁶⁷ ‘Phallogocentrism’ – a neologism combining ‘phallogocentrism’ and ‘logocentrism’ – is a term that came to prominence in feminist discourse in the 1970s, led by figures such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, who all in different ways critiqued what they saw as the male structural bias in Western civilisation, focused around language, writing, psychoanalysis, and philosophy.

tragedy is in line with the model developed by Aeschylus, and indeed the key to the surprising suitability of this highly formalistic, traditional structure is in the final word of the subtitle – ‘цикл’. The cyclical nature of menstruation, the inevitability of its occurrence and recurrence, by definition lends any drama about it a fatalism that lies at the base of tragedy as a genre. Even if the protagonist is not necessarily being controlled by the gods, as in Renaissance tragedy, the very categorization of a play as ‘tragedy’ automatically seals the protagonist’s unhappy fate. So it proves in *28 дней*.

In this cyclical drama, the first words uttered by She are destined to repeat themselves, following on from the last words at the end of the play and filling the void beyond the curtain call, as the cycle reaches the end which is also the return to the beginning. The opening exchange between She and the chorus immediately establishes the dynamic between the two acting agents, which can loosely be characterised as a conflict between individual and society, where She is the individual who speaks from the first person, and the chorus is the collective social body, with all of the norms, mores, taboos, and received wisdom and opinions that make up society.

ОНА:

Кровь.
Из меня
течет
кровь.

ХОР:

Это нормально.

ОНА:

Из меня течет
кровь!

ХОР:
Это нормально.

ОНА:
Мне больно!

ХОР:
Это нормально.

ОНА:
Почему?
Почему
это
нормально?⁶⁸

The distress and physical pain of the protagonist is dismissed by the chorus three times in succession, with repetition of the commonly heard phrase ‘это нормально’. The multivalent word ‘нормально’ can be used in many contexts, as affirmative, negative, or neutral, depending on the intonation. Its intention here is no less multivalent, perhaps being dismissive but also perhaps reassuring, explaining, and encouraging. The chorus, speaking for and on behalf of ‘women’ as an interpellated social group, tells the protagonist that her pain and blood are ‘normal’. This sets up the dialogue between the individual and society in the narrative, where the chorus is equivalent to the Lacanian ‘Other’ – the invisible presence of a judging, normalising force that determines and restricts thought and action without ever appearing in concrete form.⁶⁹ The response of the protagonist is to push back against the Other, to not accept the order of things handed down by the chorus, and instead to question and interrogate this assumed order. She asks, ‘Почему это нормально?’ The dialogue

⁶⁸ Shiliaeva.

⁶⁹ Bruce Fink describes the Lacanian Other as ‘language, knowledge, law, career, academia, authority, morality, ideals, and so on, and with the objects designated (or, more strongly stated, demanded) by the Other: grades, diplomas, success, marriage, children’. See Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 87.

that is set off here between woman as subaltern on the one hand and the Other of patriarchal society on the other hand generates a dialectical enquiry about female subjectivity in a male-dominated social order. The repetition of key motifs by the chorus is one of the devices for bringing the spectator's attention to certain norms and questioning their underlying assumptions, whilst also providing the musicality and rhythmic poetic quality required for the chorus, which by Ancient Greek tradition is sung.

One of the most striking features of the stage directions is the frequent employment of blood, which appears five times, making it a key visual motif in Shiliaeva's conception of the work. Blood is mentioned frequently in the dialogue as well. To understand the function of this motif for the author, Shiliaeva stated the following in an interview with theatre critic Aleksei Kiselev:

Для менструации и так слишком много эвфемизмов [...], в рекламе показывают не кровь, а голубую жидкость. Мне кажется, этого уже достаточно.⁷⁰

The author's opposition to euphemisms positions her work in the tradition of the 'Новая драма' movement, which strove to replace the literary language of the stage with the living language of natural speech. The ubiquitous presence of blood on stage in Shiliaeva's text can be seen in the same vein, as an attempt to escape the literary in favour of the literal. Moreover, if tragedy in Ancient Greece was born out of ritual ceremony, then in *28 дней*, blood is the symbolic leitmotif that provides for the emergence of the ritualistic in the text. Although the presence of 'blood' spilt through violence on stage is well-established in theatre since at least the Early Modern period,

⁷⁰ Aleksei Kiselev, "'Dlia menstruatsii slishkom mnogo evfemizmov": Ol'ga Shiliaeva – o svoei feministskoi oratorii', *Afisha Daily*, 30 January 2019 <<https://daily.afisha.ru/brain/11167-dlya-menstruatsii-slishkom-mnogo-evfemizmov-olga-shilyaeva-o-svoey-feministskoy-oratorii/>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

the same cannot be said for menstrual blood, which is considerably more taboo. Early on in the text, the chorus lists the comically absurd euphemisms that exist in the Russian language for menstruation:

Мои “красные друзья”,
Я ненавижу вас.

Красные дни календаря.
Женские дни.
Эти дни.
Гости из Красноярска.
Красноармейцы.
Праздники.
Критические дни.
Монстры.
Красный дар.
Дела.
Месяки.
Меськи.
Печальки.
Менты пришли.
Менстрец.
Дни закрытых дверей.
Багровые реки.⁷¹

The fact that this list appears very early on in the script reflects the importance for the author of overcoming the euphemistic language of societal propriety, in favour of a more direct, literal language that normalises this natural biological process. What emerges from the conflict of individual and society in the text is an imagined alternative world – a feminine utopia in which ‘окровавленные штаны были бы нормой. И прокладки бесплатно давали’.⁷² Dramaturg and critic Natal’ia Zaitseva writes in this regard: “‘28 дней’, при всей своей обманчивой насмешливости,

⁷¹ Shiliaeva.

⁷² Shiliaeva.

предлагает проект нового мира'.⁷³ Zaitseva goes on to claim that this 'новый мир' is one that is characterized by 'повышенная женская чувствительность'.⁷⁴ In line with feminist criticism concerning the 'othering' of female physiology in favour of the male norm, *28 дней* proposes another world in which female physiology is the norm.

Perhaps it is the saturation of the text with blood and its repeated spilling on to the stage that ritually enacts the processes required to bring about this other world. Blood as the symbol of cyclical life and death has the capacity to enact this rebirth through the power of the ritual. However, blood is a multivalent discursive image, symbolising birth, death, and cleansing, whilst also being capable of signifying the inescapable horror of the abject, such as the blood on the hands of Lady Macbeth that she cannot wash away. In *28 дней*, the inescapable, returning presence of the expelled blood is integral to its discourse. The clothes worn by the protagonist, as well as those worn by all ten members of the chorus, are all stained with blood. Furthermore, it is written in the stage directions that at one stage they all collectively mop the floor to clean away the blood, only for it to reappear spreading across the floor a short time later. The cyclical return of the expelled blood therefore has more of an abject quality in the text than a cleansing one. As such, the abjected menstrual blood that covers everything in *28 дней* has an unresolved, ambiguous status in the configuration of the other world.

Given the ubiquity of blood in *28 дней*, and its centrality to the poetics of the text, it is perhaps surprising that when it was brought to the stage of Teatr.doc, the directors chose to leave this detail out. Instead of buckets of blood and blood-stained

⁷³ Natal'ia Zaitseva, 'Nastroika optiki: O feministskom povorote v rossiiskoi dramaturgii', *Teatr*, 38 (2019), 40-51 (p. 51).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

clothes as in the stage directions, the actors wore red and black clothing of various hues, unfortunately reproducing exactly the kind of metaphorical stage language that Shiliaeva was critiquing. In an interview I conducted with co-director Iurii Muravitskii, he told me that he understood the author's intention, but with the resources they had at their disposal and with the technical limitations of the Teatr.doc performance space, it was impossible to achieve Shiliaeva's vision satisfactorily, stating:

Мы с художницей, с Катей Щегловой, на эту тему очень много говорили, на самом деле. Потому что она хотела кровь, она хотела целый какой-то мусорный бак, в который кто-то залезает, все в крови. Действительно, эти прокладки. Немножко в сторону акционизма, современного искусства, вот в эту сторону двинуть, всё забросать, закидать. Я ей тогда сказал, что, Катя, это офигенная идея, но, к сожалению, чтобы сделать это так, как ты говоришь, у нас нет такой возможности. То есть просто технологически это сделать круто и играть этот спектакль постоянно, тем более, в «Театре.doc», в котором все минималистично, потому что нет особых средств ни на что.⁷⁵

Muravitskii considered that approaching the text with a certain ironic distance, rather than literally, was the only solution to staging it successfully within their financial and technical means. It is worth noting that in two other productions of *28 дней* that came after that of Teatr.doc – one in Kemerovo and one in Izhevsk – neither saw fit to follow the stage directions either, with not a drop of blood in sight anywhere.⁷⁶ Whilst the technical limitations are undeniably a determining factor, there is a suspicion that the literal depiction of menstrual blood onstage in Russia remains taboo to the extent

⁷⁵ Iurii Muravitskii, Unpublished interview with author, Moscow, 2019. The original interview was planned to take place with both directors present, but Mikhailishcheva was unfortunately unable to attend on the day.

⁷⁶ These two productions, directed by Olesia Shilova in Kemerovo and Ivan Lichidov in Izhevsk, can be found on YouTube. See: Pavel Starikov, *28 Dnei*, online video recording, YouTube, 13 February 2020 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IL0GX3zmJcM>> [accessed 23 December 2020]; Art-rezidentsiia, *28 DNEI*, online video recording, YouTube, 11 December 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FXb6TsNnb0>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

that it cannot be done without metaphor, however much Shiliaeva would wish to see otherwise. Given the popularity and success of the rehearsed reading at the Liubimovka, it is evident that the text alone is powerful enough to exist as a purely aural experience. Indeed, the focus of all the stagings of the play to date has been text-centred. Whilst Muravitskii and Mikhalishcheva's production is undeniably successful on many fronts, what it loses in its refusal to literally depict the menstrual blood that soaks the entire text is the transformative power of the ritual. Without blood, any staging of *28 дней* is limited to being social satire and critique, rather than creating new symbolic and discursive meanings – the glimpse of the other world – through ritual death and rebirth.

Muravitskii is quoted as saying on the Teatr.doc website that realism and traditional psychological dramatic methods – which have dominated Russian theatre since Stanislavskii to this day – ‘do not work here’.⁷⁷ The characters are not characterised as such and do not possess character arcs – instead they are flat, generalised figures who represent social groups rather than concrete individuals. In this regard they conform to Beumers and Lipovetsky's description of Russian documentary theatre (see above). In the employment of Brechtian devices of alienation, irony, knowingness, and self-reflexivity, Muravitskii and Mikhalishcheva's *28 дней* created a removed distance from the text. It would seem that the dispute which arose over their interpretation in the staging of the text derived from this issue of distance from the text. Should the text be the subject or object in the staging? Should it be treated as if from the first person or the third? Russian feminist activist Maria Alekhina of Pussy Riot fame told Muravitskii that she did not like his

⁷⁷ ‘Реализм, психологический театр здесь не работает’. Iurii Muravitskii, quoted on the Teatr.doc website page for *28 dnei*, <<https://teatrdoc.ru/events.php?id=258>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

staging of the play. According to Muravitskii, her impression was: ‘слишком много иронии, и [...] мы смеёмся над теми вещами, над которыми смеяться нельзя’.⁷⁸

There was also criticism from other voices in the feminist community, including Shiliaeva herself who expressed regret at the use of metaphor for the visual depiction of menstrual blood.⁷⁹ One of the aspects of the Teatr.doc production that seemed to cause the most disagreement amongst audiences and critics familiar with the text was the directorial decision to dress the protagonist in a Snow White costume. Although this image was too ironic for some people’s liking, when it is placed in the context of the staging of the play as a Brechtian epic-opera, with all of the words sung instead of spoken, the costume choice appears to function as a dismantling and conflating of high and low genres, as pioneered by Brecht in his epic (or as he later called it, dialectical) operas, such as *The Threepenny Opera* (premiered in 1928) and *The Good Person of Szechwan* (premiered in 1943).

The problem with the Brechtian approach is that whilst the director may unequivocally side with the feminist cause at the core of the play, he cannot avoid interrogating that cause and reflecting on it from a distance, as an object of ironic theatrical play. In Muravitskii’s words, ‘живой Брехт это была ходячая диалектика’.⁸⁰ He states that any other approach is a form of self-censorship:

Театр имеет право смеяться над всем, и как бы это безусловная прерогатива театра, и если мы начинаем ограничивать театр... то есть: над этим можно смеяться, над этим можно, над этим нельзя, – все, это значит цензура, это несвобода и как бы это не может быть правильным, вот. Поэтому я считаю как раз, что мы имеем право над всем смеяться.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Muravitskii.

⁷⁹ See Kiselev.

⁸⁰ Muravitskii.

⁸¹ Ibid.

This is the dialectical approach that made Brecht such a famously frustrating figure for the political left in his lifetime, and it would seem that the same is still true of this approach today, in Russian theatre at the very least. Nonetheless, Muravitskii's Brechtian approach to the material can be considered a success, for making it accessible to a broader audience who were, thanks to the Brechtian alienation effect, in fact not alienated from the feminist content but were able to engage with it from a certain distance. This came, however, at the cost of some of the core audience – the feminist community – who saw it as ironic laughter at issues important to them. This contradiction could not be resolved and remains the legacy of Muravitskii and Mikhailishcheva's interpretation of the text.

28 дней is certainly deserving of a rigorous and engaged analysis from a feminist – and female – perspective, which would be productive and illuminating, but that is not a task for this author. Instead, I wish to interrogate another standout feature of the text, which is its reflection of a discourse of 'corporeal subjectivity'.⁸² This includes the Foucauldian notion of 'biopolitics', and in this regard it has much in common with the other works considered in this chapter. In spite of its uncompromising feminist critique of patriarchal society, *28 дней* ultimately ends up in a qualitatively similar kind of ontological aporia.

Diana Coole identifies several binary oppositions in Western culture's treatment of the body that reveal a structural gender bias: 'mind-body, culture-nature, subject-object, rational-irrational, active-passive, public-private – in which the first of each pair is perceived as superior, masculine, the norm'.⁸³ Although current state cultural policy takes the position that 'Россия – не Европа', it is clear from this list

⁸² 'Corporeal subjectivity' is Raia Prokhovnik's term, quoted in Diana Coole, 'The Body and Politics', in *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*, ed. by Georgina Waylen and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 165-88 (p. 184).

⁸³ Coole, p. 168.

that Russian culture is in this regard inseparable from Western/European in displaying a similar gender bias.⁸⁴ As Michel Foucault demonstrated, the history of the Enlightenment is the history of the medicalisation and regulation of the body, where its excesses are pathologised and categorized as lying outside of the (masculine) norm. The claim of objectivity in the medical sciences, which for a long time held that women were irrational and inferior due to their biology, was subsequently revealed to be a contingent social construct. It is this same question of female irrationality that *28 дней* begins to investigate and deconstruct in its latter stages. In the process, it reveals that this question is not yet consigned to history, no less an assumed truth today than in the past. It reflects on this truism, questions its veracity, and overturns it to present an ‘other world’ in which this irrationality is in fact the rational view of the order of things. In other words, it is a moment of clarity and truth – a revelation:

А может,
 это все зачем-то нужно?
 Почему мы хотим
 Избавиться от ПМС?
 Чтобы быть удобными?
 А может, это не ПМС,
 а тебе и правда лучше бросить парня?
 Развестись с мужем?
 Может, твой начальник
 И правда мудака?
 А ты говоришь:
 ПМС и глушишь
 себя таблетками.
 Может, ПМС тебе затем,
 Чтобы увидеть это?
 Мы считаем, что
 в ПМС мы ненормальные.
 А может, наоборот?

⁸⁴ The phrase ‘Россия – не Европа’ appeared in an earlier draft of the *Osnovy gosudarstvennoi kul’turnoi politiki*, which was seen by leading cultural figures. Its presence was heavily criticised by both Mark Zakharov and Elena Gremina in the discussion about the document that took place at the Meyerhold Centre in 2014, and the phrase subsequently did not appear in the final published version. See ‘Obsuzhdenie “Osnov gosudarstvennoi kul’turnoi politiki RF”’, Meyerhold Centre, Moscow, June 2014 (unpublished transcript).

В остальное время
 Мы неадекватные?
 Видим только хорошее,
 прощаем,
 закрываем глаза,
 терпим,
 относимся с юмором,
 работаем над собой,
 виним себя,
 терпим,
 еще терпим,
 стыдимся,
 молчим.⁸⁵

This passage is the climax of the dialogue between protagonist (Она) and antagonist (Мужской голос), mediated by the chorus. Everything that the protagonist has thought, experienced, questioned, and felt through the course of the dialogue – between the woman and the man, and the woman and the chorus – has brought her to this moment of subjective self-reflection. If the medicalisation of ‘premenstrual syndrome’ (PMS) and the prescription of tablets to women in order to regulate its perceived ‘excesses’ is the dominant order of things, then this moment of questioning that order offers an alternative perspective, in which the processes of female biology become a source of empowerment and truth. They offer a glimpse of alternative subjectivities, and perhaps equip the protagonist with the clarity required to take action for positive change in her life as a result. In this regard, what emerges is an emancipatory politics of female empowerment through the very bodily processes that are the source of past and present oppression, from prejudice in the workplace to exclusion from high office. What immediately follows the passage quoted above is a list of atrocities from the news, as well as firsthand accounts of sexual violence and harassment, all of which affect the (female) protagonist emotionally, whilst only arousing dismissive contempt from the (male) antagonist. His reaction is

⁸⁵ Shiliaeva.

condescendingly to tell the protagonist that her problem lies in watching the news too much and listening to sad music. This is a reflection of the kind of binary oppositions listed by Coole, in which a contrived notion of objective masculine detachment is superior to the subjective feminine compassion expressed by the protagonist. *28 дней* questions this assumption by elevating compassion above masculine emotional indifference, although it leaves the binary itself intact. The protagonist responds, ‘Я не могу оторваться. [...] Я смотрю аду в глаза’.⁸⁶ There is an ethics of responsibility here, in which the female protagonist cannot in good faith look away and ignore the plight of others, in contrast to the male antagonist, who has no qualms about doing so. Advancing the form that this feminine ‘other world’ would take, she proposes new collective rituals to compensate for the suffering that is all around in the world: ‘Нужно оплакать всех. Обязательно нужно, чтобы за тебя кто-то поплакал’.⁸⁷ What emerges in the proposition of a feminine utopia in *28 дней* is a world of shared suffering, of compassion, empathy and emotion, unregulated by the norms of a medico-scientific rationality derived from patriarchal society.

What makes this other world an imaginary utopia rather than a concrete proposition are the repeated shifts between emotional states that contradict and override the previous ones, as the hormonal cycle inexorably progresses. The sadness and compassion for the suffering of others described above gives way to calm, quiet inner reflection in the dying moments of the play:

Кто я?
 Где настоящая я?
 Где в этом во всем я?
 Где я?
 И где правда?
 Что из этого правда?

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Правда – то,
 что я вижу сейчас
 или то,
 что я буду видеть
 три недели спустя?
 Где реальность?
 Как возвыситься над этим всем?
 Кто я?
 Кто сейчас это спрашивает?
 Кто я?⁸⁸

These are the final words uttered in the play, and as such they conclude the conflict. An existential aporia has been reached from which there is no way out, except via the inexorable motion of the hormonal cycle. These words reflect the irresolvable dilemma of subjectivity, in which questions of authenticity, veracity, truth, objectivity, and identity are all enclosed by the philosophical question of the knowability of reality versus its perception, and the insurmountable gap that exists between them. This existential turn in the play perhaps comes as a surprise, casting doubt over the proceedings and undermining the veracity of what has come before, which it turns out was only ever a product of a transitory subjective perception of reality at a given moment in time and place. On the other hand, it is the inevitable result of the dialectic of tragedy that underpins the structure of the play. As in Brecht, dialectical theatre does not lend itself to partisan political manifesto-making – things are revealed as contingent, subjective, and always in a constant state of change.

The existential aporia of ‘кто я’ is the end point of the interrogation of corporeal subjectivity, and is also its beginning. This is demonstrated by the final action that the protagonist performs, which is silently to draw floral patterns in her own menstrual blood on the floor of the stage. The blood is symbolic of death, as well as being literally the material stuff of creativity, which is a rebirth. A uniquely

⁸⁸ Ibid.

feminine creativity thus emerges out of symbolic death and pain. This provisionally restores the promise of the other world; a world that incorporates the abjected menstrual blood as the essence of its materiality.

28 дней was described by one (male) viewer on social media as a work of radical feminism ‘drunk on resentment’.⁸⁹ There is no place for feminism in the current state cultural policy, which sees the place of women and their role in society in purely traditional terms. This is reflected in the negative view of feminism held by many, including amongst women. Suspicion of feminism is stoked by, amongst other things, the patriarchal ideological worldview of the (overwhelmingly male) regime, a view which is widely promoted by state media in tandem with the increasingly influential Russian Orthodox Church. As Zaitseva points out, ‘феминистский театр вызывает мощный протест у консервативного большинства’.⁹⁰ However, the irony here is that *28 дней*, in all its contradictions, questioning, and existential self-reflection, is far from being radically feminist in form or content. It sketches the outlines of a feminist utopia before casting it aside, and follows a highly formal model that was created by the patriarchal Ancient Greeks, with a dialectic derived from ‘phallogocentric’ Western philosophy. In utilising these traditions, however, *28 дней* presents a serious political challenge to the patriarchal culture of High Putinism, which cannot accommodate its interrogation of the social consensus. In this regard, Shiliaeva’s text is a political project to unveil the contingent norms that regulate society and that patrol women’s place in the social order.

⁸⁹ Aleksandr Tyryshkin, Facebook post, 20 September 2019: ‘Ужасный спектакль. Хотелось уйти. [...] Получил набор оголтелых штампов радикального феминизма, упивающегося своим ресантиментом. На зрителей выливают ушат помоев в агрессивной форме.’

⁹⁰ Zaitseva, p. 51.

What ultimately unites all three of the plays in this chapter are characters who struggle to understand one another, which is in turn a reflection on the shortcomings of language and the inadequacies of human communication in modern society (a concern in drama since at least Chekhov). In response to this, each play resorts to different interrogations of subjectivity and the perception of reality as such. ‘Кто я?’ is a question that appears in one form or another across all three texts, and each considers this universal human problem in different ways that are nonetheless all grounded in the particular context of contemporary reality. They reflect on the contingent and arbitrary nature of the ideological norms that police society, as well as on the identity formation and self-determination of the individual who is subjected to its normative regimes. If, in *Человек из Подольска*, a citizen’s perception of the world around him can be violently overwritten by the ideological norms of the authorities, then human perception is always unstable and subject to change, liable to rewrite itself in the inexorable process of subjective becoming. This is what we then see in both *Философы* and *28 дней* with the emergence of alternative subjectivities, not controlled or regulated by those same normative regimes. These new works of Russian drama lay the groundwork for a politics of resistance and ‘dissensus’ – different ways of seeing, doing and thinking – in the aesthetics of contemporary theatre at the margins of High Putinism.

4) Actionist Theatre: The Burden of Gruz 300

‘Moscow Actionism’ [Московский акционизм] arose as an artistic phenomenon in the Russian capital during the 1990s, although its roots trace back to Moscow Conceptualism and the performance actions of *Kollektivnye deistviia* in the late Soviet period. This chapter aims to analyse the incursion of Actionism – traditionally located in the realm of contemporary art – into the space of the theatre in recent years. This has been primarily the work of a collective called Gruz 300, who stage unsanctioned performances on the city streets in Moscow and elsewhere. The collective is comprised largely of artists and musicians, rather than trained theatre makers. They avoid stages and dedicated theatre spaces. Instead, they perform in public space in the summer, and in found space in the winter (in empty warehouses, for example, for which they negotiate temporary usage).

The first question is: what makes these performances theatre rather than contemporary art, and what makes them different from other works of Russian Actionism, which are not considered to be theatre? The reasons are threefold. Firstly, the collective calls itself a theatre and describes its performances as ‘спектакли’, a word that is used only in relation to theatre. The use of the words ‘театр’ and ‘спектакль’ does not necessarily mean anything in and of itself, but in combination with the other factors, it is clear that they are not meant ironically and indeed it seems that the collective would like their performances to be considered seriously as theatre. Secondly, although some performances were free, most required the purchase of a ticket online in advance, thus making it quite unlike a usual Actionist ‘акция’, which is unannounced ahead of time and carried out before an unsuspecting public. Thirdly, the performances fulfil the basic criteria for theatre set out by the influential British

director Peter Brook, which is to say, there is a performer and a spectator, and everything else is extra.¹ To this we might add that the performances are of a finite length, which is now also usually considered a prerequisite for theatre.

In the light of twenty-first-century developments in theatre with buzzwords such as ‘postdramatic’, ‘immersive’, ‘site-specific’, and ‘interactive’, coupled with the rise of performance art and the expansion of the field of performance studies, no solid distinction between theatre and performance is now tenable. In 2010, one of the most well-known performance artists of our time, Marina Abramović, was asked what the difference is between theatre and performance art. She answered:

To be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre. Theatre is fake... The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real.²

Whilst this statement was most likely intended as a provocation (Abramović makes theatre of her own, and recently starred in an opera), the point here is that the kind of classical theatre that Abramović is referring to is no longer the only one, and in fact the difference that she identifies between theatre as fake and performance as real has been steadily eroded over the past few decades to the point where it is impossible to distinguish theatre and performance in such a categorical way. This is as true in the West as it is in Russia, where, to give one example, it would be difficult to describe the ‘свидетельский театр’ of Teatr.doc as ‘fake’ or ‘not real’, and yet it is firmly still theatre. The hybridization and erosion of a solid distinction between these two fields of art has facilitated the incursion of the Gruz 300 performance collective into the

¹ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 11.

² Marina Abramović, quoted in Sean O’Hagan, ‘Interview: Marina Abramović’, *The Guardian*, 3 October 2010
<<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/oct/03/interview-marina-abramovic-performance-artist>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

discursive space of the theatre (if not into the physical space), and legitimized their claims to make theatre that is consciously situated outside of the mainstream establishment.

Gruz 300 was founded in the early part of 2019 as the creative team behind an immersive show of the same name, *Груз 300*. It went on to produce another work the following autumn, called *Рейв № 228*. As a theatre collective, Gruz 300 is non-hierarchical and employs ensemble working methods and practices, meaning that there is no director as such. However, the performances are billed as ‘curated’ by Katrin Nenasheva. Nenasheva is a well-known performance artist and ‘акционистка’, whose previous actions include ‘Не бойся’ (2015), ‘На-казание’ (2016) and ‘Между здесь и там: истории городских изоляций’ (2017). For ‘Не бойся’, Nenasheva wandered around central Moscow every day for thirty days dressed in a prison uniform, in an effort to bring attention to the problems of women in Russian prisons. In ‘На-казание’, the artist spent twenty one days in Moscow’s most popular public spaces with a metal bed frame strapped to her back, in an attempt to raise awareness of the treatment of children in Russian orphanages. Using a similar approach for ‘Между здесь и там’, Nenasheva spent twenty three days viewing the world through a virtual-reality (VR) headset whilst blindly feeling her way around the city centre. The headset showed the interior of a psychiatric institution [психоневрологический интернат], and was designed to induce members of the public who put on the headset to reflect on the invisible imprisonment of thousands of Russian citizens in such places, many of whom have never seen the city for themselves and would similarly fumble their way around, were they suddenly to appear unaccompanied in a public place.

Nenasheva identifies herself with what has been described as the ‘third wave’ of Russian Actionism.³ During an interview I conducted with the artist in Moscow in October 2019, Nenasheva laid out the three so-called ‘waves’ of Russian Actionism as follows:

У российского акционизма три волны. Первая это московский акционизм: Осмоловский, группа ЭТИ, это 91-98 год, потом 2008-2012 это как раз радикальные все эти действия группы Война, Pussy Riot и отчасти Павленского, а третий акционизм это собственно тот, который... Он не такой громкий, и он не ставит себе задачей быть радикальным, он ставит себе задачей коммуникативность и очень важно – повседневность: ты делаешь длительные работы и каждый день в рамках акции привлекаешь людей к чему-нибудь, то есть, это такая протяжённая история.⁴

The other name in the emerging field of so-called ‘third-wave’ Actionism is Dar’ia Serenko, whose action ‘Тихий пикет’ (2016) was, as its name suggests, a more subtle and less aggressive form of Actionism than the famous examples set by Voina, Pussy Riot, and Petr Pavlenskii. I would suggest that this shift in Russian Actionism towards something more closely resembling Anglo-American ‘social practice’ is what enabled an Actionist such as Nenasheva to consider theatre as a viable medium through which her artistic practice could manifest itself. The reformulation of the objective of the Actionist performance [акция] – from monologic, unidirectional political statement, to dialogic communication with ordinary people – brought it closer to the kinds of communicative practices that are characteristic of contemporary theatre, examples of which were seen in the preceding chapters.

It is also true, however, that the two jailed members of the allegedly ‘second wave’ Actionist group Pussy Riot – Nadia Tolokonnikova and Maria Alekhina – have

³ See Pavel Mitenko and Sylvia Chassaing, ‘Tret’ia volna aktsionizma: iskusstvo svobodnogo deistviia vo vremia reaktsii’, *Khudozhestvennii zhurnal*, 102 (2017) <<http://moscowartmagazine.com/issue/60/article/1241>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁴ Katrin Nenasheva, Unpublished interview with author, Moscow, 2019.

both separately made works of theatre in recent years on the back of their experiences in prison and newfound global fame.⁵ In addition to this, Nenasheva performed one day of her month-long action ‘Не бойся’ with Tolokonnikova, which puts the notion of a ‘third wave’ of Actionism as a distinct emergence under question, especially given the absence of any substantial time lapse between the so-called second and third waves. As we saw with documentary theatre over the same period (see Chapter One), the events of 2012 – namely the return of Putin to the presidency, the protest movement that culminated in ‘Болотное дело’, and the imprisonment of Actionists Tolokonnikova and Alekhina of Pussy Riot for their performance of ‘Панк-молебен’ in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Saviour – were the signs of a turning tide in Russian politics. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the change in circumstances necessitated a different kind of Actionism to that of the preceding Putin and Medvedev years, and equally to that of the ‘first wave’ in the 1990s. In this regard, so-called ‘third wave’ Actionism should also be considered for its qualities as a practical response of adaptation to the new, post-‘Панк-молебен’ reactionary environment of High Putinism.

It is clear that the wave of restrictive legislation which started in 2013 affected the kind of action that the leading figures of Actionism at the time could perform without risking their personal safety and freedom. This resulted in the emigration from Russia of some of its leading figures, namely the married couple Oleg Vorotnikov and Natal’ia Sokol of Voina, as well as Petr Pavlenskii. Even the work of Tolokonnikova and Alekhina since their release from prison in 2014 has become less overtly provocative and more focused on helping ordinary citizens, as seen in their

⁵ Tolokonnikova made *Inside Pussy Riot* (2017) in collaboration with the theatre collective Les Enfants Terribles at the Saatchi Gallery in London. Alekhina made and acted in *Burning Doors* (2016) in collaboration with Belarus Free Theatre, which premiered at the Journeys International Festival in the UK.

founding of the human rights organization *Zona prava* and the online media platform *Mediazona*. The actions of the ‘third wave’ (Nenasheva, Serenko) are certainly a far cry from the first major work of Actionism in the 1990s, when art group E.T.I. lay down in front of the Lenin mausoleum in Red Square, using their bodies to spell out the word ‘хуй’.⁶ The same is true for the most famous actions prior to the conservative-reactionary turn, such as that performed by *Voina* in 2011, which won the group the prestigious Innovation Prize for best work of visual art. This is probably the best-known work of Russian Actionism in the twenty-first century after *Pussy Riot*’s world famous ‘Панк-молебен’. It was called ‘Хуй в ПЛЕИУ у ФСБ!’, and involved a sixty-five- by twenty-seven-metre phallus drawn on to Liteinii Bridge in St Petersburg, which when the bridge was raised at night presented itself directly facing the Bol’shoi dom – the notorious regional headquarters of the NKVD during the Stalinist Terror, then succeeded by the KGB, and now occupied by the FSB.⁷ It is difficult to compare provocative actions such as these by E.T.I., *Voina*, and *Pussy Riot* to the subtly engaging practices of Actionism from more recent years. In this regard, Actionism as a field of artistic practice has undergone an adaptive transformation that reflects the broader paradigm shift for cultural production in Russia since 2012. This process seems to have brought radically dissensual performance art into an overlap with its equivalent in the theatre. Recalling theatre director Iurii Muravitskii’s reflections on his production of *28 дней* from the previous chapter, he described discussing moving the work ‘немножко в сторону акционизма, современного искусства’.⁸ It would seem that the two fields were

⁶ The action was called ‘Хуй на Красной площади’ and took place on 18 April 1991. See Anatolii Osmolovskii, “‘Khui na Krasnoi ploshchadi’ – 25 let!”, *Artgid*, 18 April 2016 <<https://artguide.com/posts/1019>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁷ “‘Voine” prisudili gospremiu za fallos na Liteinom mostu”, *Sankt-Peterburg.ru*, 8 April 2011 <<http://saint-petersburg.ru/m/culture/old/301495/>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁸ Iurii Muravitskii, Unpublished interview with author, Moscow, 2019.

moving in the direction of one another simultaneously at the end of the 2010s. Russian Actionism has a history distinct from that of the theatre.⁹ Yet here, in the particular ecology of High Putinism, we see the convergence of the two and the emergence of a new phenomenon in the history of both that speaks to the theme of this thesis – the interaction of politics and aesthetics in contemporary Russian culture.

Gruz 300 is a loose collective, consisting of three regular collaborators – Katrin Nenasheva, Sasha Starost’ (musician-activist), and Stas Gorev (musician) – and a number of others who participate on a project-by-project basis. The two major works by Gruz 300 in 2019 will be considered up close in this chapter, followed by one of Nenasheva’s personal projects. The first is the work of the same name – *Груз 300* (in italicised Cyrillic, as differentiated from the name of the collective Gruz 300, which is in unitalicised Roman letters). This work is described as an immersive show about torture. The second is *Рейв № 228*, which is called a ‘спектакль-променад’, and broaches the theme of falsified convictions under article 228 of the criminal code (possession of narcotics). The third and final work is a project entitled *Россия 20:20*, which deals with depression – one of the most widespread illnesses in Russia, that rarely gets acknowledged as such. This final performance is not by the Gruz 300 collective – its creation is credited to Nenasheva and video artist Ivan Shevel’.

However, it is similar to the work of Gruz 300 and demonstrates many of the same

⁹ Literature is sparse on the history of Russian Actionism. The only book-length publication that exists dedicated to this topic is Andrei Kovalev’s catalogue *Rossiiskii aktsionizm, 1990-2000* (Moscow: World Art Muzei, 2007). However, many journalistic and scholarly articles exist in both Russian and English, and a recent attempt was made to document the history of the broader field of performance in Russia, including but not limited to Actionism. See *Russian Performances: Word, Object, Action*, ed. by Julie A. Buckler, Julie A. Cassiday, and Boris Wolfson (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018). Also of relevance is the catalogue from the 2017 Saatchi Gallery exhibition of the same name, *Art Riot: Post-Soviet Actionism*, ed. by Andrei Kovalev (Moscow: ABCdesign Studio, 2017). On the more specific topic of Pussy Riot, there is a slightly larger volume of literature. See, for example, Eliot Borenstein’s most recent publication *Pussy Riot: Speaking Punk to Power* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

traits that define the two works by the theatre collective, to the extent that it will be productive to consider them alongside each other. As the final production to be analysed in detail in this thesis, it will also serve to illustrate the disappearance of any solid distinction between theatre and performance art at the margins of contemporary Russian culture. *Россия 20:20* was not labelled by its creators as theatre, and yet it has many of the qualities that define hybrid experimental performance theatre around the world in the present epoch.

The term ‘группа 300’ arose in the Soviet Union during the war in Afghanistan and is Russian military jargon for injured soldiers and personnel who need to be withdrawn from frontline action (in contrast to ‘группа 200’, which refers to the deceased). During the infamously bloody and protracted conflict in Afghanistan, many Soviet soldiers were forced out of action not only by physical injuries, but by mental conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as well. Naming the theatre company Gruz 300, from the outset the artists established a reference to the burden of physical and psychological trauma that many former soldiers carry with them. They expanded the meaning of the term to apply to all citizens who carry invisible burdens deriving from trauma in all its varieties, which the work of the theatre is oriented towards revealing and working through.¹⁰ Analysing the work of Gruz 300 and Katrin Nenasheva, this chapter will build on the trends and conclusions drawn in the previous chapters, where certain common themes were described: discourses of torture (Chapter One); ‘new documentarism’ (Chapter Two); and body politics (Chapter Three). It is in the meeting of Actionism and theatre that some

¹⁰ Nenasheva stated in an interview that the name is partly a reference to Aleksei Balabanov’s film *Gruz 200* (2007), which also deals with the theme of social violence and trauma. See Leva Levchenko, “‘Khoroshii gorod, gde pytaiut’”: Interv’iu s Katrin Nenashevoi’, *The Village*, 4 October 2018 <<https://www.the-village.ru/village/weekend/art/327405-katrin>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

unexplored contours of politics and aesthetics in contemporary Russian culture reveal themselves.

Being the seat of federal government and state power, Moscow is historically the focal point of Russian Actionism, as the artists attempt through their ‘акции’ to generate a dialogue with the acting authorities, using the general public as their audience and witness. Although all of the performances in this chapter are described in their Moscow iterations, it is of central importance to the *Gruz 300* project and indeed to Nenasheva in her solo work that the performances are seen and heard beyond the capital. *Груз 300* has played numerous times in St Petersburg, as well as in Vladimir. *Рейс 228* has been adapted for Samara, Perm’, and Cheliabinsk, as well as St Petersburg. *Россия 20:20* took place on the streets of Moscow, but was live-streamed online with full interactive access to anyone, anywhere in the world with internet and smartphone access. The works featured in this chapter should therefore not be viewed as purely a Moscow phenomenon.

Груз 300

Like the three works of ‘new documentarism’ that were considered in Chapter Two, this production does not have a conventional play script to refer to as such and no recordings are available, meaning that a description of the performance and a documentation of its history is important for any analysis. As with those works, my sources are a combination of interviews (conducted both by me and by others) and primary sources collected during attendance at performances in Moscow, supplemented by a variety of materials available online. For *Груз 300*, a valuable

additional resource is a copy of the unpublished working scenario, which was shared with me by Nenasheva for the purposes of this research project. The tangible advantage in working with shows linked to a relatively high-profile artist-Actionist is that a lot more attention is paid to them by the media, as well as by users of social media, which widens the variety of secondary sources available on the internet relating to the performances. That said, however, the attention these works receive is almost entirely superficial, focusing on the headline-grabbing aspects, such as police intervention, rather than critiquing the works themselves. The nature of these performance-actions is that they are always changing as the project evolves and matures, to say nothing of the need to adapt to the specificities of each new performance site. This fluidity presents both challenges and opportunities to the artists, as well as to subsequent critical engagement with the works in question.

Груз 300 premiered on 10 February 2019 at a converted warehouse space called Modul', located in the north-east of the city beyond the Third Ring. In addition to Nenasheva, Starost', and Gorev, *Груз 300* also involved Artem Materinskii (listed as a 'документалист'), Olesia Gudkova (психолог), and Polina Andreevna (перформерка). The running time for the performance was approximately three hours, and was divided into three roughly equal length parts. The first contained five documentary-style acted scenes based on the testimonies of torture victim Ruslan Suleimanov; the second part was an interactive game called 'Шавка'; and the third part was a post-show discussion for those who were willing (and who remained until the end). In the performance I attended there was no discussion, because the game section was cut short by the news that the police were on their way – this was one of the drawbacks of locating that particular performance in public space, when most others had taken place behind closed doors. However, what was lost by the curtailed

performance was compensated for by the choice of location – perhaps the most unusual monument in the Russian capital, the pithily titled ‘Memorial to the Defenders of the White House in 1993’. This location was particularly generative in terms of the discursive interaction between performance and place: as mentioned in relation to *Конституция* in Chapter Two, the regime of violence and systemic abuse of power that characterises High Putinism can be traced back to the constitutional crisis and the events of 1993 that this site commemorates. This is in addition to the simple act of locating a performance about violence (and the consequences for its victims) on a site that commemorates the victims of state power and violence. This monument to one of the defining moments in the history of the modern Russian state thus serves as the *mise-en-scène* for a performance about perhaps the defining feature of its history in the present – systemic violence in the form of torture.

An immersive show about torture is a paradox that takes the ‘immersive’ genre to its logical end point. What started as a novel form of experimental participatory theatre that was intended to emancipate the spectator from the passivity of the seat in the auditorium became commodified and commercialised in the twenty-first century to the extent that any claim to emancipatory politics became untenable. Indeed, the inevitable distancing from the ‘immersive’ tag has already begun. One of the leaders in the field, UK-based theatre company ZU-UK released their ‘Post-Immersive Manifesto’ in 2020, stating the following:

Over the past decade, ‘immersive’ has arguably been one of the most overused terms to describe theatre productions that aim to involve audiences in unconventional ways. With the mainstream success of specific ‘immersive’ productions, this trend goes beyond the theatre and arts industry. From games distributors to Westfield shopping centres, just about every organisation seems

to be discussing how ‘immersive’ events can give their product an edgier public profile or increase sales.¹¹

Twentieth-century Modernists across Europe and at different times dreamed of a new, radically participatory theatre, that could repair the damage to society wrought by bourgeois capitalism. From Romain Rolland’s seminal 1903 book *Le théâtre du peuple*, through Platon Kerzhentsev’s popular theoretical work for the Proletkul’t *Творческий театр* (1918), to Guy Debord’s *La société du spectacle* (1967), early attempts were made to overcome the conventions of script-based drama through the active participation of the spectator in the performance-event.¹² The emergence of so-called ‘immersive theatre’ at the end of the twentieth century has been linked with the concomitant rise of neoliberalism as the dominant global economic order.¹³ The radical Modernist dream of social emancipation for the spectator has been replaced by the ‘immersive’ consumer experience. The ‘experience economy’ continues to dominate production in the culture industry, of which theatre is a part.¹⁴

The rise of hybrid forms of theatre and ‘immersive experiences’ has for many years been a feature of trendy cultural life in Moscow and St Petersburg. I experienced this first-hand as a minor character in an immersive adaptation of the Strugatsky brothers’ 1969 novel *Отель «У Погибшего Альпиниста»*, directed by Maksim Didenko at the Richter Hotel in Moscow in 2018. The show turned out to be

¹¹ See Jorge Lopes Ramos and others, ‘The Post-Immersive Manifesto’, *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 16, 2 (2020), 196-212 (p. 196) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14794713.2020.1766282>>.

¹² See: Romain Rolland, *Le théâtre du peuple* (Paris: Cahiers de la Quinzaine, 1903); Platon Kerzhentsev, *Tvorcheskii teatr* (Petrograd: [n. pub.], 1918); Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1967).

¹³ See Adam Alston, ‘Introduction: Theatre as Experience Machine’ in *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 1-34.

¹⁴ For the relationship of the ‘experience economy’ and the theatre, see Chapter Eight of Andy Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 158-92.

in large part a promotional event for a new brand of flavoured liqueur. Likewise, a simple Google search on 20 May 2020 for ‘иммерсивный спектакль’ produced a number of hits: for example, a *Time Out Moscow* article from 2018 entitled ‘5 лучших иммерсивных спектаклей’, which leads with a photograph of a young woman standing in a doorway dressed in black and with her face painted in Mexican Day of the Dead style.¹⁵ This kind of highly commercialised, appropriative immersive theatre now dominates the scene, and for many people the ‘immersive’ tag is now associated with light entertainment rather than art-activism or social engagement. Writing about *Груз 300*, the theatre critic Il’mira Bolotian expressed such a view: ‘Спектакль создатели обозначили как иммерсивный, то есть выбрали определение, которое теперь уже стойко ассоциируется с развлечением’.¹⁶ Thus, when the makers of *Груз 300* labelled it an immersive show about torture, they ironically subverted the commercial-consumer expectations of the immersive genre: it was apparent (or should have been apparent) to the prospective spectator that such a show would not be the usual light-hearted entertainment.

The question that each potential spectator was confronted with when deciding whether to buy a ticket for the show or not was what form an immersive show about torture would take, and how far were the makers willing to go with this idea. There were unspoken questions such as: Will I personally be tortured? Surely the limits of theatre (and the law) are such that a spectator cannot be physically tortured during a show? Is real physical violence permissible in the realm of theatre, where members of the public are not coming with such expectations or desires? These kinds of questions presented the spectator with a high degree of unpredictability and uncertainty over

¹⁵ Aleksandra Vial’, ‘5 luchshikh immersivnykh spektaklei’, *Time Out Moscow*, 24 March 2018 <<https://www.timeout.ru/msk/feature/475870>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

¹⁶ See Il’mira Bolotian, ‘Teatr kak pytka: “Gruz 300” i ego protivorechiia’, *Teatr*, 38 (2019), 98-103 (p. 100).

what exactly they were signing up for when buying a ticket. On the one hand, this can be seen as a re-appropriation of the immersive genre, taking it back to its original idea as a form of cultural and artistic emancipation. On the other hand, it can be seen as the opposite of this – as a reflection on the genre’s imprisonment within the expectations that it has built for itself, revealing the modern spectator’s insatiable desire to consume ‘experiences’, as an integral component of the contemporary creative economy of the Russian capital.

Because the *Грыз 300* team are not theatre makers, they display no interest or personal stake in the kinds of internal disputes and battles for recognition that go on within the theatre world. This is not for lack of ambition, however, with Nenasheva boldly stating on her social media: ‘АКЦИОНИСТСКИЙ ТЕАТР СПАСЕТ МИР’.¹⁷ In one sense, their work could be called ‘outsider theatre’, because it is made by people with no specialist theatre training or background in theatre practice, although because they are all artists and creatives of some description, it cannot be labelled ‘outsider art’, which is somewhat different. On the one hand, this outsider-ness is a liberating force on their work, as they are not bound by the conventions or standards that trained theatre practitioners inevitably set themselves in and against. On the other hand, it is this same lack of training and experience that undermines the quality of the work on occasion, as inconsistencies across performances make it a perpetual ‘work in progress’. By the time I became a spectator at one of the final performances of *Грыз 300*, many of the earlier flaws commented on by critics had been ironed out. One of these included, for example, placing performers in the audience to unexpectedly intervene during the game section. Because the performers are not professional actors,

¹⁷ Katrin Nenasheva, Facebook post, 24 November 2019.

this set-up was easily detected by the audience.¹⁸ Whilst tweaking a performance during the run is a natural part of theatre, the significant variations between performances of *Груз 300* demonstrate the element of unpreparedness that the creators as non-professional theatre makers were willing to accept when opening the doors to the public for the first time.

The creators' stated aim for the project was to use the medium of theatre as a means through which to talk about one of the most taboo subjects in Russian public discourse – systemic violence and the consequences for its victims. The description for the performance on the promotional clip uploaded to Nenasheva's YouTube channel poses the questions that it seeks to raise and sets up the expectations of the spectator:

Быть или не бить? Соглашаться или проходить мимо? Брать пример или оставаться при своём? В иммерсивном спектакле Груз 300 мы рассуждаем о силе, о выборе, о травме и системном насилии. Трагедия, драма, триллер или даже комедия — в этом спектакле зритель сам создаёт жанр. В основе показа — история бывшего заключённого омской колонии Руслана Сулейманова.¹⁹

In the first formulation here we see a reworking of Hamlet's ubiquitous words, punning on the phonetic similarity of the Russian words 'быть' [to be], and 'бить' [to beat]. The implication of the new reworked version, 'to be or not to beat', is that the state of being is one of violence, and conversely not to beat, i.e. not to use violence, is a state of non-being. This equation of being and violence as one and the same, as a metonymy, is to say that violence is the ontological state of being. This equation lies at the core of the discourse generated by *Груз 300*. In this regard, the performance

¹⁸ This criticism came from theatre critic Viktor Vilisov in his Telegram post about the show. See Vilisov, Telegram channel @apollonia, 2 April 2019.

¹⁹ Katrin Nenasheva, *Gruz 300: immersivnyi spektakl' o sistemnom nasilii*, online video recording, YouTube, 4 March 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNu_rDsNUhA> [accessed 23 December 2020].

presents violence as the ontology that defines and determines the experience of reality in High Putinist Russia. There is no place for non-violence in the world of *Груз 300*, where the choice is not between violence or non-violence, but instead between violence or non-being. In one respect, this recalls Beumers and Lipovetsky's thesis about the 'discourse of violence' in Russian theatre in the post-Soviet era, although in most other respects we are dealing here with something different to the dramatic hyper-naturalism of 'Новая драма'.²⁰

One of the peculiarities of this work is its backstory – it started life not as theatre, but was in fact originally conceived by Nenasheva as a personal exhibition, with a series of performance pieces to accompany it, on the theme of torture and PTSD. The project was titled 'Груз 300: Коллажи переживаний', and was due to be exhibited at the state-funded Galereia na Solianke, which has a long history of being a platform for contemporary performance art in the Russian capital. Somewhat predictably, the scheduled exhibition fell foul of the authorities and the opening was postponed a matter of days before it was due to open to the public in September 2018.²¹ Shortly afterwards, it was cancelled completely and was followed later that year by the resignation of the gallery director, curator Fedor Pavlov-Andreevich, who had been in charge for nearly a decade.²² In the run-up to the scheduled opening of the exhibition, Nenasheva staged an action multiple times in Moscow and other nearby cities in which she could be found in the middle of a busy street inside an animal cage, itself wrapped entirely in cling film. A sign was hung on the cage stating that it

²⁰ For 'hyper-naturalism' in 'Новая драма', see Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009), pp. 34-39.

²¹ 'Galereia v Moskve otmenila vystavku protiv pytok Katrin Nenashevoi', *Radio Svoboda*, 20 September 2018 <<https://www.svoboda.org/a/29500108.html>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

²² 'Direktor galerei na Solianke uvolilsia iz-za otmeny vystavki o pytkakh', *Radio Svoboda*, 24 September 2018 <<https://www.svoboda.org/a/29673922.html>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

contained a body which had been tortured – this was a reference to Nenasheva’s personal experience in the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR), where she had been taken captive and tortured for two days by the local paramilitary earlier that year.²³ Her desire to stage an action on this theme was twofold: firstly, as a performative exploration of and confrontation with the burden of trauma that she carried as a result of her first-hand experience of torture; and secondly as an attempt to bring attention to the widespread phenomenon of torture that occurs in state institutions on a daily basis throughout the country. During the transition from gallery exhibition and street action to theatre performance, the precise nature and extent of routine torture specifically in the state prison system came into sharp focus as a result of the public testimonies of Ruslan Suleimanov, amongst others, as well as the emergence of videos in July 2018 from Yaroslavl’ penal colony showing the brutal torture of an inmate by a large group of guards.²⁴ Thus, by the time *Грыз 300* became a theatre work, a significant amount of media attention had been paid to the censored exhibition, as well as to Nenasheva’s public statements in response. However, none of this could have prepared audiences for the immersive element of the *Грыз 300* experience.

The first part of the performance is the more conventional – it is documentary in style, with a mixture of verbatim text and autobiographical monologue. There are also light interactive elements for the spectator, although these do not determine the course of the action at this stage. An example of this is when one of the characters prepares buckwheat in an imaginary kitchen and feeds it to the spectators. This part is

²³ Nina Nazarova, “Oret, chto nas podorvut na minakh”: Aktivistka Katrin Nenasheva o pytkakh v DNR”, *BBC Russian*, 26 June 2018 <<https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-44618444>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

²⁴ Ol’ga Bobrova, ‘10 minut v klasse vospitatel’noi raboty’, *Novaia gazeta*, 20 July 2018 <<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/07/20/77222-10-minut-v-klasse-vospitatelnoy-raboty>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

built around a series of monologues, all of which derive from three sources: firstly, the public statements made by Ruslan Suleimanov that were published in *Novaia gazeta* relating to his experiences of torture whilst imprisoned in Omsk;²⁵ secondly, an additional interview with Suleimanov carried out by Nenasheva subsequently for the purposes of the project; and thirdly, Nenasheva's own first-person testimony relating to her experiences as a hostage in the DPR. In the working scenario text, there are five characters (numbered, without names). Suleimanov's testimonies are split up and distributed between them. Nenasheva speaks her own testimony in its entirety, a fact which casts this particular element of the performance into the category of 'witness theatre', as pioneered by Teatr.doc over the past decade (see Chapter One). There are four occasions in the script when the specific names of those prison guards who tortured Suleimanov are called out. The calling out of the names of those responsible is the same device that is used in the three documentary works analysed in Chapter One, and is especially central to *Пытки*, where a long list of the names of the perpetrators is read out. The importance of naming those responsible during the performance as an act of witnessing and of citizens' justice in the absence of concrete legal justice was considered in the context of that work, but there is good reason to apply a similar reasoning here. A public statement made by Nenasheva in relation to her cancelled exhibition supports this idea:

В этой практике очень важен факт свидетельствования, ведь у пыток обычно нет свидетеля. И если бы человек пришел на выставку и стал участником перформанса, у него была бы миссия стать свидетелем переживания, чего не хватает людям в ситуации пыток.²⁶

²⁵ Elena Masiuk, 'Lomka. Omsk', *Novaia gazeta*, 13 May 2018 <<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/05/13/76435-lomka-omsk>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

²⁶ Nenasheva, in Levchenko, "Khoroshii gorod, gde pytaiut"

For Nenasheva, the act of witnessing is important because, as she says, ‘ведь у пыток обычно нет свидетеля’. As we saw with the three documentary plays in Chapter One, bearing witness to the event is a fundamental part of the creation of meaning in this form of theatre, and is what generates the ethical demand for the spectator-as-witness. This is where the similarities end, however, because if in *Пытки* the horror lies in the observation of the matter-of-fact playing out of torture and our corresponding inability as spectators to act (being compelled passively to sit and watch in the audience), in *Груз 300* the horror is reversed: the spectator is able to move around and act but is powerless all the same, unable to bring themselves to intervene or to change the course of the action, and correspondingly becoming complicit in the violence. This becomes more acute as the performance goes on, but there is one indicative moment from the first (documentary) section, when we hear a verbatim monologue taken from Suleimanov’s testimony:

Меня привезли по этапу в СИЗО-1 в Омске, нас тогда было человек 17, и сразу всех отправили в стакан, это такая маленькая камера. Выводили по одному в матрасовку, там было много сотрудников, на кровати стояла тарелка с гречневой кашей, эту кашу всех заставляли есть — типа так новичков принимали. Ложка была одна на всех.

[...] Сотрудников было человек 6-7. Они мне ноги растянули на матрасе, со всех сторон держат, стянули с меня штаны, трусы, и стали ложкой засовывать мне эту кашу в задний проход. Сколько это продолжалось, не скажу, когда с такими моментами сталкиваешься, о времени не думаешь.²⁷

This testimony, when placed in combination with the scene that precedes it when one of the performers cooks and distributes buckwheat for the spectators to eat (which all were strongly encouraged to do, although it was possible to decline), generates a

²⁷ Ruslan Suleimanov, in Katrin Nenasheva and others, *Gruz 300* (unpublished scenario, 2019). See also Masiuk, ‘Lomka. Omsk’.

particular kind of horror of the ‘real’. The association for the spectator between the two elements – the buckwheat that features in the description of Suleimanov’s physical violation by guards, and the buckwheat that they still hold in their hands on a small disposable plate and were moments ago consuming with a plastic spoon – has the potential to generate a visceral reaction in the spectator (most likely nausea and revulsion, but various reactions are possible). In this manner, *Грыз 300* works with affect to try to set up and create reactions in the spectator through sensory and associative triggers such as this one. This is a kind of immersive ‘montage of attractions’ similar in function to Eizenshtein’s famous cattle-slaughter scene in *Стачка* (1925). Here the image – in this case buckwheat – generates the affective associations that relate to the overall theme of the work.

In contrast to conventional documentary plays that maintain the division between performers (who perform) and audience (who watch), the freedom that the spectator is granted to wander at will around the performance space in *Грыз 300* – to move from room to room, and to accept or decline the offer of buckwheat – creates a complicity with the event that is a different kind of demand to that of bearing witness in a documentary play. The freedom of choice – to come and go, to walk away and not participate – becomes a burden in itself. A question is posed in the promotional video for the performance:

Кто устанавливает границу между искусством и реальностью, между общественным договором и насилием?

This is followed not by an answer to the question, but by an imperative:

Сделай свой выбор.²⁸

The final choice of phrase is seemingly an ironic reference to Putin's 2018 presidential campaign, in which this three-word slogan circulated in the media and in public discourse across the country. Popular internet memes arose in response, reflecting the feeling of the total absence of choice in the election and the corresponding meaninglessness of the slogan. For example, one meme stated, 'Сделай свой выбор. Путин или Путин'. The 'choice' that is euphemistically referred to in the political slogan is mirrored in *Груз 300*, where choice turns out to be rather its opposite. Here it becomes a (non-)choice not between Putin and Putin, but between systemic violence and the social contract. As the spectator discovers over the course of the performance, the freedom of choice they are endowed with as an integral part of the immersive experience can be an unexpectedly heavy ethical burden. This feeling was perhaps heightened in *Груз 300* due to the fact that the kinds of choices spectators are accustomed to making in more commercially-oriented 'immersive experiences' are considerably less demanding, often amounting to little more than 'the freedom to spend money'.²⁹

The first few lines of Nenasheva's opening monologue in the performance are worth quoting here at length, for a useful insight not only into the authorial intention behind *Груз 300*, but also into the other two works in this chapter, and into the performance artist's approach to her work as a whole:

Мне сказали, что в этом спектакле я должна играть роль женщины,
которая звонит по телефону и повторяет одну и ту же фразу. Мол, я, как

²⁸ Nenasheva, *Gruz 300: immersivnyi spektakl' o sistemnom nasilii*.

²⁹ Regarding 'choice' in immersive shows, Ramos et al. state: 'This is an analogue of the unfreedom twenty-first-century citizens are trained to think of as experiences of true freedom; the freedom to choose between drinking beer or vodka, or eating sweets or chocolates, constitutes nothing more than the freedom to spend money.' See Ramos and others, p. 197.

человек, переживший пытки и делающий об этом проекты то и на самом деле делаю, что сигналиваю в пустоту и прошу о помощи. Кому я звоню? О какой помощи я прошу? Одному Богу известно. Наверное, Богу также известно, почему на долю одного выпадает насилие, а на долю другого - страдание. Хотя, может, насильник все же страдает потом, только его жертва редко это видит. А еще говорят – зачем рассказывать о своей травме? Зачем окружающие должны о ней знать? Это ведь делает всем хуже. С кем мне тогда остается разговаривать? Поэтому я буду разговаривать с богом [*sic*].³⁰

This Brechtian ‘epic’ device of addressing the audience directly, in the first person, and informing us what she has been told to say by fictitious ‘puppet masters’ behind the scene sets the tone for the rest of the performance, which is continuously looking to subvert the norms of theatre and the expectations of the spectator. One of the major themes in Nenasheva’s work in general is speaking out about trauma and giving a platform to marginalised or otherwise unheard voices. The question posed in her monologue above – ‘зачем рассказывать о своей травме?’ – is one that she repeatedly returns to and tries to address in different ways across multiple different works, in the process enabling others to do the same. At three points during her opening monologue, Nenasheva holds up a placard. In order of appearance, they each read:

1) ПОЧЕМУ – Я?

2) ПОЧЕМУ – ТЫ?

3) А ЕСЛИ Я – ОТОМЩУ?³¹

In response to Nenasheva holding up these placards, one of the performers positioned in the audience begins to throw pebbles at her. In this way, the psychological trauma suffered by a victim of torture, and the questions that the victim struggles with as a

³⁰ Nenasheva and others.

³¹ Ibid.

result, are answered by society in the form of a public stoning. This is symbolic of the response that a trauma victim receives when they publicly ask such questions, because as Nenasheva said in her opening monologue, why should everyone know about your trauma when ‘это ведь делает всем хуже’. The questions from these placards are the transitional link to the second part of the performance, the interactive game called ‘Шавка’.

As the spectators walk to the area where the game will be played, some still awkwardly holding a half-eaten plate of buckwheat in their hands, the performers assume a more casual persona, playing ‘themselves’. As written in the directions in the scenario, ‘Во время Шавки мы как бы не несем тех или иных ролей, но при этом образы у нас остаются’.³² Having access to the scenario is insightful, for making visible some of the working mechanisms behind this text-decentred performance piece. It confirms notions discussed previously relating to the ‘real’ in contemporary performance aesthetics. The instructions quoted above are indicative of the fact that however much a performer appears to ‘play themselves’ or ‘not act’ as an aesthetic choice in bringing ‘the real’ into the performance, a persona or ‘image’ [образ] must always necessarily remain.

The rules of the game are explained to the audience roughly as follows: two names of spectators are pulled out of a hat; the first name to be pulled out plays the role of ‘командир’ and the second name plays the role of ‘шавка’. For a duration of three minutes, the командир has total power over the шавка. The role of the командир is to exercise this power in whatever way they wish. Correspondingly, for the duration of the game the шавка must submit totally to the authority of the командир and carry out their orders without exception. The rules of the game are

³² Ibid.

sufficiently simple that no one could be left confused by them. However, the rules also open up such a vast space of freedom for the person playing the командир that it proved difficult to get the game going due to the reluctance and understandable hesitancy of the participants to fully exercise the power they were unexpectedly handed. The game was clearly an exercise in power relations between individuals, and an exploration of the boundary ‘между общественным договором и насилием’ (*Груз 300* promotional clip, quoted above). This is the moment at which we as spectators-turned-participants are expected to make our choice (the ‘сделай свой выбор’ from the promotional clip). How will we use the unlimited power we have been given, and equally how will we react to being given orders and told to submit to the authority of a stranger unconditionally, especially when it crosses our personal tolerance thresholds or lines of moral acceptability? These personal boundaries are different for everyone, a fact that became apparent in the playing out of the game.

The varying reactions to the game each time it was performed are indicative of the problems and successes that the production had as a whole. At the premiere and early performances in Moscow, before the show had been written about and when audiences had no expectations coming into it, the reactions were the most controversial. Many people left in objection or disgust long before the end of the game, whilst those who refused to participate in the game when their name was drawn from the hat were offered two options: either to hold up a sign with the words ‘я просто смотрю на насилие’ if they wished to remain, or to leave the performance entirely. In one notable instance publicised on social media and even reaching some online news outlets, a spectator initially chose the former option (the sign), but after a short period of time changed their mind and left, then subsequently returned with others to disrupt the performance, which controversially ended with said spectator

being slapped by one of the performers.³³ In the show attended by Il'mira Bolotian, she estimated that around half of the audience left before the end of the game, some more publicly than others.³⁴ This was roughly the same proportion as during the outdoor performance at the Monument to the Defenders of the White House in 1993, which took place more than half a year after the premiere. This suggests that audiences were still not coming prepared for what they saw, having difficulty accepting the premise of the game even after it had become known about and reported on in various media outlets.

Some rounds of the game did become violent and visibly distressing for the participants, which as a result made for extremely difficult viewing from the sidelines. Other rounds passed by fairly uneventfully, with spectator-participants clearly uncomfortable and conflicted about how to act in the situation, to the point of inertia. The game far from always descended into violence, but nonetheless the power dynamic of master-slave that existed between the two players meant that violence was intrinsic to all the interactions between them. It was also not necessarily the case that the шавка would be the one to break down. In reality, it was often more difficult and traumatising for the командир, who was the active agent, and therefore had to grapple with the violation of the boundaries of consent in their actions more than the шавка, in their passive role. This was particularly evident when there was a pre-existing social inequality at play, such as in the case of a male командир and a female шавка (a man being reluctant to hit a woman). It was also notable how there seemed to be fewer inhibitions to immersion in the roles when such a structural inequality was

³³ See Sergei Feofanov, 'Posetitel'nitsy immersivnogo spektaklia o nasilii "Gruz 300" poluchili poshchichiny', *The Village*, 3 April 2019 <<https://www.the-village.ru/village/city/news-city/346517-gruz-300-poshchichiny>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

³⁴ Bolotian describes how some spectators did not hold back from making their feelings known as they departed early, shouting out various critical assessments on their way out. See Bolotian, 'Teatr kak pytka'.

reversed, i.e. a female командир and male шавка. Making something of a generalisation: women were more willing to be violent, more so towards men, less so towards other women. Complex issues around power hierarchies in society – connected to gender, race, education, class privilege, and cultural capital – all seemed to contribute to the psychology of the game and determined its playing out in real time.

For those who became emotionally overwhelmed by what they were seeing or experiencing, the organisers specially brought in a therapist to each performance who sat in a separate room, where tea and biscuits were provided along with space and time to talk. According to Nenasheva, this service was taken up in almost all of the performances they put on, a fact which testifies to the difficulty that some audience members experienced as a result of the game. Some viewers complained afterwards on social media that the game was reckless and irresponsible, with one stating, ‘Смотреть на насилие и ничего не делать – это тоже насилие’.³⁵ The irony of this criticism is that the intention of the game was to make exactly that point – to show that passive complicity in violence is no better than the violent act itself. The performance goes one step further, revealing how easy it is to become complicit, and correspondingly how difficult it is to object and intervene when violence is the rule of the game, which is to say, when it is systemic, as it is in the prison system and indeed in all organs of state security and law enforcement. This was seen previously in *Пытки* and *Оюб*. Likewise, the difficulty of objection and intervention in a hierarchical social structure with pre-determined rules was seen in *Locker room talk*. In *Груз 300*, these two phenomena are brought together, reflecting on the nature of these power structures, as well as revealing the burden of trauma that they produce.

³⁵ See Feofanov.

Whilst the reaction and audience feedback to the performance was mixed, few were left indifferent, and this is perhaps one measure of its success.³⁶ If its aim was to bring attention to the experience and burden of trauma caused by torture, and not just to the fact of its occurrence, then the focus shifts from the informational sphere to the emotional-therapeutic. This relates to the activist work of Nenasheva and Starost' in what they call 'психоактивизм', where they try to bring public attention to the problems of mental health and psychological trauma that are experienced by a large proportion of the population and yet are largely stigmatized, covered up, ignored and underfunded in the public health system. Here, the object of the performance is not an 'other' to whom this occurs; it is not Suleimanov, Nenasheva, or a generalised representative of a social group. The spectators themselves become the object. This is therefore not a victimization or objectification of the real figures whose testimonies feature as the starting point for the performance – they are quickly forgotten once the game starts. Instead, the only objectification can be of one's own self, whose senses of propriety, dignity, and respect have been starkly revealed as arbitrary, contingent, and porous. To remain, to play and observe the game, means to be complicit, but to walk away in objection is not by any means the more ethical option – this is to deny subjectivity to the victims of violence, and to turn a blind eye to the acts of violence that are committed every day in institutions of state security and law enforcement (prisons, jails, FSB and Centre E offices). To turn away is also to refuse to try to understand both sides, to deny the experience of the 'other' as necessarily part of one's own. After all, this is just a game played in public by consenting adults with full supervision by a group of observers (the other spectators). The irreconcilable ethical

³⁶ The work was almost entirely ignored by the theatre community itself, however. Bolotian wrote a piece on the work for the journal *Teatr*, and Vilisov wrote a post about it on his Telegram channel. There were also a handful of non-specialist commentaries and news articles on various small online media platforms, mostly of a superficial nature.

contradiction lies in the the fact that any accusation of taking the game too literally can likewise be countered with accusations of taking violence too lightly, and vice versa.

Many online reviewers (professional and non-professional) writing about the performance described being left shaken up and affected emotionally by what they had experienced, in a way that they had clearly not encountered in the theatre before. In this regard, its divisiveness links it to Aleksei Balabanov's no less controversial film *Груз 200* in more than just name. Where Balabanov's film dealt in corpses (the 'груз 200' of the title), *Груз 300* is very much about the living – those who carry the invisible burden of trauma with them every day of their lives, unbeknownst to or ignored by the healthy. As Nenasheva commented regarding her experience of torture in the DPR:

Я разговаривала с одним правозащитником о том, что в России каждый третий служил, плюс если взять афган, Чечню, Донбасс, есть очень много людей хотя бы с минимальным опытом [травмы]: 'Где эти все люди?' А он говорит: 'Ну вот они как бы растворились'.³⁷

In the final instance, then, the performance of *Груз 300* makes the widespread social phenomenon of 'груз 300' visible, which is to say, the experience of playing and observing the game 'Шавка' indicates towards the burden of trauma that a large segment of the population carries with it. It works to de-stigmatise the issue and to normalise the discourse of help and support that is needed. These people have not 'disappeared' [lit. dissolved], as the human rights worker suggested to Nenasheva. They are very much still alive and at large in society, and in need of social support. *Груз 300* does not overcome systemic violence in and of itself – if anything, it

³⁷ Nenasheva, in Nazarova.

reproduces it in order to interrogate it – but no theatre performance or indeed any work of art can achieve that alone. What it does, however, is start the conversation.

A criticism of *Грыз 300* is its failure to get all of the spectators on board with the game. The performance was clearly billed as ‘immersive’, which meant that audiences were prepared for this aspect and came willing to take part proactively in some capacity. As Ramos et al. make clear in their ‘Post-Immersive Manifesto’, when staging games as part of a work of participatory theatre, certain criteria and conditions are important for it to succeed:

Clear boundaries from the outset can enable individuals to know what is expected of them, and therefore overcome personal fears of being exposed by ‘getting it wrong’. The earlier audiences ‘sign up’ to a clearly articulated invitation, the quicker audiences can allow themselves to inhabit this agreed game-world and become an active participant in it. Creating a contract of engagement from the outset can reduce gaps between audience members’ feeling of ownership, entitlement and active engagement.³⁸

Clearly the makers of *Грыз 300* partly failed in this regard, although they themselves stated publicly that the problem lies with the unpreparedness of Russian audiences, rather than with the performance itself.³⁹ Given that the creative team are not professional theatre makers and had little prior experience of making participatory theatre events, it is perhaps unfair to lay all of the blame on the audiences. Whilst the walk-outs can be passed off as the collateral damage of an ‘immersive show about torture’, and that it was an audience failure not an artistic one, some responsibility must lie with the artists for the set-up. A lack of ‘clear boundaries from the outset’ meant that a significant portion of people (around half of the audience) were not able to tolerate the playing out of the game and chose to leave before the end. Perhaps this was the point and the organisers were willing to accept this loss. However, had a more

³⁸ Ramos and others, p. 211.

³⁹ Nenasheva, in Feofanov.

‘clearly articulated invitation’ been made, then perhaps more people would have remained until the end, thereby creating a more inclusive experience and subsequently a more constructive dialogue and post-performance discussion, which the makers claim was their ultimate intention. Spectators leaving in objection or disgust cannot be a measure of success when the stated aim is to address an important social issue collectively.

That said, however, the successes of *Грыз 300* certainly outweigh its shortcomings. It brutally exposed the arbitrariness of public decency – more specifically that of the liberal cultural elite of the cosmopolitan Russian capital – who are able to tolerate the widespread torture of others and violence by the state on a daily basis when it is behind closed doors, but cannot bear to see violence with their own eyes, even when it is in a controlled environment with the explicit aim of investigating its forms and effects. Judging by the reaction online, no one had experienced anything quite like *Грыз 300* before, so this unexpected Actionist intervention into the world of the theatre came as a shock. The creators managed to pursue an important social issue without resorting to pathos or didacticism, and there was no sense of victimisation or objectivisation of individuals for artistic ends. The arrival of the Actionists on the theatre scene disrupted the commercialised and commodified ‘immersive’ genre. The immersive experience is taken to its outer limits, where the pleasure of interactive spectating gives way to the unbearable act of observing and participating in real violence. In other words, the spectator is forced to confront the inescapable abject, which in this case is the unwelcome, unwanted sight of the usually invisible burden of trauma caused by violence that is carried by others.

For Ramos et al., the ‘immersive fallacy’ is ‘the proposition that greater pleasure is produced for an audience by transporting them into a simulated reality –

wherein they are further embedded through their choices and actions'.⁴⁰ What we see in *Грыз 300* is the immersive logic taken to its extreme – where the greatest possible pleasure tips over into the greatest possible displeasure, to un-simulated pain and violence – whilst posing the final question, 'Are you not entertained?' Audiences who came to *Грыз 300* because of its 'immersive' billing and expected to be transported to another world, to the 'unreality' of VR or other technological gimmicks, would have had a surprise (and were perhaps some of those who left early) because in the world of *Грыз 300* the spectator is not transported anywhere, and the only escape from the horror of the reality that it presents is the exit. By avoiding the 'immersive fallacy', our agency as spectators in *Грыз 300* is not just the freedom to move around and participate in the action during the performance – it is also the freedom to think and act after it ends. This, for Rancière, is where 'emancipated spectatorship' takes place.⁴¹ Can such agency be a force for reconfiguring social relationships and building community through a disavowal of the High Putinist consensus that would always suppress and conceal rather than address and discuss? This is a question that the Gruz 300 collective took into its next project, which premiered only half a year after the explosive arrival of the Actionists on the scene with their first work.

Рейс № 228

Spectators received geographic coordinates by text message the evening before the event. These led to Park Gorka, in the Kitai-gorod region of central

⁴⁰ Ramos and others, p. 210.

⁴¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 22-23.

Moscow. The message also advised bringing a fully-charged smartphone, headphones, a raincoat, and ID. Upon arrival, transparent plastic wallets were distributed, which contained two sheets of A4 paper, a pencil, and a piece of chalk, as well as two smaller pieces of paper – one with instructions on how to start the show, and the other with contact details for support in case of arrest. *Рейв № 228* (henceforth *Рейв 228*) was the second work of 2019 by the Actionist theatre collective Gruz 300, this time on the theme of narcotics and the falsification of criminal cases under article 228 of the Russian criminal code.

It was billed by the creators as a ‘спектакль-променад’ and as an immersive show, but besides that very little additional information was shared with spectators prior to the event. As with *Груз 300*, it was not apparent ahead of time what form of ‘immersive’ to expect. The ‘promenade’ description suggested that a degree of walking would be involved. The instructions in the pack told spectators to subscribe to a chat-bot in the Telegram messenger application in order to start the show. Upon entering ‘/start’ into the chat-bot, the first message appeared, which set the scene and set up the expectations of the spectator:

Привет! Рейв № 228 – это городская симфония переживаний, страхов, поисков и выборов. Он начинается прямо сейчас. Мы собрали истории людей, употребляющих наркотики и людей, которым их подбросили. Это истории из разных уголков России. В этом путешествии стоит быть внимательным. В этом путешествии стоит не бояться действовать, искать и находить. В финале мы подготовили для вас важную встречу. Увидимся через несколько часов!⁴²

At this point we as spectators still have very little idea about what exactly is going on, what form the show will take, and what is expected of us as participants. From this message we learn that there are documentary materials involved, and we learn that we

⁴² Telegram chat-bot @rave228_bot, 28 September 2019.

will need to seek things out. We also learn that there will be a finale of sorts a few hours from now, but we do not know where. The description of the work as a ‘city symphony’ implies that our journey will be integrated into and interactive with the topography of urban Moscow.

Pressing the button ‘начать’ within the chat-bot released the first set of instructions, which included a pinned location (somewhere in the vicinity of Armianskii pereulok), a photograph of a dark back alley with a red arrow and circle drawn on to it, and an audio track. It was only at this point that it became clear what the spectator was expected to do in this immersive promenade:

В течение всего рейва вам будет необходимо искать закладки - это зиплоки с кодовыми словами, вводя которые, вы будете получать аудио-историю, задание и локацию следующей закладки.⁴³

Thus, in what was akin to an adult treasure hunt, on a city-wide scale, we set off in search of ‘закладки’, the small plastic bags used in the drug trade, which are bought and sold illegally online and stashed in secret locations around the city. This was an attempt to simulate the real experience of drug users in acquiring illegal substances in contemporary Russia. One of the creators’ stated aims with the project was to raise awareness of this underground practice and in so doing to de-stigmatize the people whose lives are affected by it – not only the users themselves, but also their families and dependents, including partners, children, and parents. There were six such searches, which required journeys by foot and metro around the city. Each search was accompanied by an audio track, which was timed to coincide with the length of time required to get from one location to the next. The audio contained verbatim accounts of people’s experience with recreational drugs, state therapy programmes, the

⁴³ Ibid.

criminal justice system, and the falsification of criminal charges under article 228 resulting in real prison sentences. In addition to this, at each location a task was revealed, which incited the spectator to take action in ways that reflected on the individual stories being heard. This brought the spectator into dialogue not only with the content of the audio, but also with the city as an interlocutor, as an actor, and as a discursive space.

Before describing the *Peйe 228* experience in more detail, it is worth mentioning some statistics on the scale of the problem that the creators were trying to address with their work. Over 140,000 Russian citizens are doing time in prisons throughout the country under the infamous article 228 of the criminal code – the possession or acquiring of illegal substances. Significantly more people are convicted under this article than any other, a state of affairs that has earned article 228 the nickname ‘народная статья’. In 2019, over a quarter of the total prison population were serving convictions ‘по народной’, which is to say, under article 228. A decade and a half earlier, in 2004, the total number serving under article 228 was two thirds less (43,000 people), and this is against a background of a one third drop in the total prison population over this period, which is to say that whilst the prison population has been steeply declining, the number of people serving time under article 228 has risen sharply.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, these statistics are neither due to higher illegal substance circulation nor due to better policing. According to Ol’ga Romanova, the director of *Русь сидящая*, a Moscow-based NGO that assists citizens who come into contact with the Russian legal justice system, around 40% of such cases involve

⁴⁴ Ol’ga Romanova, ‘My Ivan Golunov. Kak fabrikuiut dela o narkoprestupleniakh’, *Carnegie Moscow Centre*, 10 June 2019 <<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/79278>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

people who are innocent.⁴⁵ This should be set against the statistic that guilty verdicts were handed down in 99.77% of cases brought to court in 2018, or 1 person reprieved in 425.⁴⁶ This conviction rate is one of the highest in the world, and concomitantly Russia's legal justice system was ranked at 94 out of 128 globally in 2020 by the World Justice Project – officially the worst-performing of all post-Soviet countries, having dropped below Uzbekistan since the year before.⁴⁷ To the question as to why there are so many convictions in Russia under article 228, Romanova said:

Конечно, фальсифицируют не только дела по наркопреступлениям. Просто их фальсифицировать легче всего, отчего эта статья зовется «народной». В зонах так и говорят: «По какой статье?» – «По народной».⁴⁸

Furthermore, Romanova stated that in the entire history of the existence of Русь сидящая, which she founded in 2008, she can only remember one case where the court turned the tables back on the prosecution, but even that was not on the grounds of falsification (which is a Constitutional crime) – it was for abuse of authority and extortion, which is a lesser crime. This is to say that the chances of proving a falsification and bringing a case against the authorities are practically zero. The huge public outcry and resulting scandal surrounding the case of journalist Ivan Golunov, who was arrested in June 2019 on clearly fabricated charges of possession of narcotics under article 228, is the exception that proves the rule: even in his extremely high-profile case, only a few low-ranking police employees were dismissed as a

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Aleksandr Sokolov, 'Goskorporatsiia "Pravosudie": Chast' pervaiia. Issledovanie o tom, mozno li dokazat' nevinovnost' v rossiiskom sude', *Proekt*, 15 May 2019 <<https://www.proekt.media/research/opravdatelny-prigovor>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁴⁷ 'World Justice Project Rule of Law Index 2020', *World Justice Project*, 11 March 2020 <<https://worldjusticeproject.org/our-work/research-and-data/wjp-rule-law-index-2020>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁴⁸ Romanova.

result, and the case against them for falsification was kicked into the long grass of the Russian court system.⁴⁹

The team behind *Peйв 228* – co-creators Katrin Nenasheva, Diana Meierkhol'd, and Konstantin Chaplii – were keen to shift the narrative focus away from high-profile public figures such as Golunov and those considered ‘political prisoners’, who usually receive a great deal of media attention, in order to highlight the plight of ordinary people whose cases are never picked up on by the media, many of whom serve long prison sentences for crimes they have not committed without anyone taking notice. This is not to detract from individual cases, but it is an attempt to redress the extreme imbalance that exists, where Golunov can be saved thanks to the media rallying around him in support, and yet in the vast majority of other cases of falsification the authorities win. Speaking about the project, Nenasheva stated the following in this regard:

Обычные люди, не представители какого-то сообщества, не активисты, не художники, не журналисты, тем более в регионах – они чаще всего не имеют возможности получать какую-то квалифицированную юридическую помощь. И, соответственно, понять, что дело фальсифицировано, ты можешь только когда у тебя есть грамотный юрист. Поэтому эти дела все держатся в секрете и не всплывают на поверхность. Поэтому у нас есть какая-то реальная статистика, а реальных историй у нас очень мало.

[...] И мы потратили какое-то время на то, чтобы откапывать эту информацию, искать фамилии таких людей, связываться с ними, у нас не было идеи создать сразу что-то художественное из этого, мы просто хотели, чтобы был этот список и чтобы у нас были на митинге листовки, которые мы бы раздавали людям, и в этих листовках была бы информация о том, кто ещё сидит по 228 статье. На самом деле таким

⁴⁹ The case against five low- and middle-ranking former police officers is still ongoing at the time of writing. See, for example, ‘Delo eks-politseiskikh iz dela Golunova peredali v Genprokuraturu’, *Kommersant*”, 9 October 2020 <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4528324>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

образом мы узнали практически о всех героях, истории которых вложили потом в спектакль.⁵⁰

Acknowledging the scale of the problem, the creators of *Peйв 228* set out to tell the real stories of ordinary people that had not caught public attention. To do this they employed a combination of participatory performance practices, documentary techniques, and technology to create an experience for the spectator which brushed up against the topography of the city and its people in a direct way that carried a small but nonetheless real degree of personal risk for everyone involved.

Walking from Park Gorka in the direction of Armianskii pereulok, the first audio file plays on our smartphones. The walk is only ten or so minutes, yet the audio file is nineteen minutes in length, so spectators are free to slowly meander their way through the backstreets of the historic Kitai-gorod district. Already the feature that marks this work out from its predecessor is the isolated, atomized nature of the experience: everyone walks in silence, listening to the audio through headphones. Even if you are walking in a group, having come in a pair or perhaps having teamed up with other spectators, it is a solitary, individual journey that everyone makes from one location to the next. Each story we hear narrated to us is told by someone who finds themselves isolated, and in every case it is a similar story – one person against the system. It is in this regard that the atomization and isolation of the spectator through the individual walks around the city and through being plugged into a smartphone – where all attention is directed to it, rather than to any performer or other person – is a recreation of the conditions that the narrators of the stories find themselves in. It is additionally a reflection on the isolated, stigmatised status of drug

⁵⁰ Nenasheva, Unpublished interview, 2019.

users and addicts in a society that shuns them and refuses to engage with the broader issues at play in this phenomenon.

Criminalisation and pathologisation are, for Foucault, two of the chief mechanisms by which overreaching structures of state power attempt to subjectivise and thus regulate the individual in society.⁵¹ These mechanisms are ideologically motivated and avoid addressing the real causes of social problems, such that those that result in and arise from drug abuse. Thus, as we walk in search of our first ‘закладка’, we enter into dialogue with an underground subculture that is one of the most stigmatized in Russia and statistically carries the highest degree of personal risk. A misunderstanding with the police during the show could easily lead to serious problems for spectators and performers alike, especially given the widespread practice of falsifications that the work is directly addressing. Falsifications under article 228 are usually motivated by quotas handed down from above, fulfilment of which can mean bonuses and professional promotions from the lower ranks of the police force.⁵² With this in mind, there is a question of ethics here on the artists’ part, putting spectators directly at risk of suffering a similar fate to some of the figures whose stories are heard: that is, the falsification of evidence and subsequent imprisonment under article 228. However, the organisers make clear from the beginning that there is such a risk, and participation is not recommended for migrant workers or those whose papers are not in order. The fact that some people are more able to participate freely and safely in the show than others highlights another problem – that of institutional racism and inequality before the law.

⁵¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Allan Lane, 1977; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).

⁵² This fact is acknowledged by the federal Investigative Committee in the Golunov case, who concluded that the police officers involved were merely targeting quotas when they planted drugs on the journalist (rather than it being a politically-motivated targeting on account of his journalistic activities). See ‘Дело экс-полitseiskikh iz dela Golunova’.

The first story that we hear narrated to us is by a young man who first experimented with recreational drugs when he was thirteen. He subsequently developed severe mental health problems including schizophrenia as a result of substance abuse, and spent many years in and out of psychiatric wards and prison, although life for him had improved since and seemingly stabilised. In his own words, looking back he ‘regrets nothing’ and would not change anything in his life. The narration ends with a heavy rock/industrial track, performed by the band Starost’ (the primary members of which are Sasha Starost’ and Stas Gorev, also of Gruz 300). Having followed the directions to the precise map location, the spectator finds themselves standing in a narrow, non-descript back alley, with one arm fumbling behind an old air conditioning unit, searching for a small ziplock packet. It turns out to be inconspicuously hidden on the underside of the metal unit, using a small magnet to hold the packet in place. After entering the code word contained inside the packet – ‘шиза’, which refers to the schizophrenia suffered by the first narrator – I receive a new message from the chat-bot, explaining the meaning of this location, and giving further instructions:

Добро пожаловать в ПНД! Именно здесь находятся под наблюдением люди с психическими расстройствами. У каждого своя история, но чаще всего - пространство страха и неприятия одно на всех. Оставьте ваши послания людям с психическими расстройствами, находящимися в ПНД - возможно, это станет началом диалога живых о живом и придаст пространству новых смыслов. Можете писать на земле, на стенах (для этого у вас в материалах есть мелок).⁵³

⁵³ ‘ПНД’ [психоневрологический диспансер] is a form of psychiatric hospital where people with serious mental health problems are kept for indefinite periods. Approximately 150,000 people reside in such institutions in Russia, which are almost impossible to leave, let alone be discharged from, and it is almost equally difficult to gain access from the outside. See Sasha Sulim, “‘V virtual’noi real’nosti zdes’ nakhodit’sia nel’zia”: Interv’iu aktsionistki Katrin Nenashevoi, kotoruiu zaderzhali na Krasnoi ploschadi v VR-ochkakh (i vyzvali k nei

At this point it becomes clear what the piece of chalk included in the pack is for. Others who arrived earlier have already written messages on the tarmac: ‘Мор оказаться на твоём месте’; ‘Держись’. These messages were visible from the upper windows of the psychiatric ward, and it was hoped that those being kept inside would see them and feel a rare acknowledgement of their existence from the outside world. This moment was a direct link to Nenasheva’s previous action, ‘Между здесь и там’, when she felt her way around the city in VR goggles that displayed the inside of one such institution. This gesture of writing in chalk on the tarmac was tied to the content of the first verbatim story, whilst also referring out to another separate but connected issue – the state system for treating serious mental health problems in contemporary Russia, which, according to Nenasheva, is unchanged since the late Soviet period.⁵⁴ In this way, a discursive layering occurred that made the performance more than a ‘single issue’ work, and brought multiple marginalized social groups from the shunned periphery to the centre of the spectator’s attention.

Pressing the button ‘задание выполнено’ on their device, the spectator immediately receives a new set of coordinates, photograph, and audio track. Returning from the visceral materiality of the Moscow back alley to the virtual world of the Telegram messenger app, our chat-bot tour guide leads us towards the children’s department store Detskii mir on Lubińskaia Square, directly past the front doors of the FSB building. The audio file this time starts with music, an electronic track that is the first overt nod to the ‘rave’ part of the title of the work, *Рейв 228*. A young woman then narrates her story, which includes first trying narcotics at the age of fourteen and falling into a scene of users on the Arbat due to problems at home.

psikhiatrov)’, *Meduza*, 24 June 2017 <<https://meduza.io/feature/2017/06/24/v-virtualnoy-realnosti-zdes-nahoditsya-nelzya>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁵⁴ Ibid.

She reflects on this period of her life, saying, ‘Мне кажется, это свойственно тем, кто пережил девяностые’. She ends by positively appraising the influence of certain euphoric and psychedelic substances on her life in the more recent past, and claims now to live a normal life. She describes the social stigma around rehabilitation centres in the country, and the difficulties she had with her family, but takes a pragmatic view towards the issue in general.

Having tracked down the next packet inside Detskii mir, after entering the password ‘взросление’ I receive my next task, which is to write a letter to my teenage self, openly confessing to the difficulties and traumas of the past, and, with the benefit of hindsight, describing how they were managed or overcome. I can keep this letter for myself or leave it there amongst the toys for someone young to find and perhaps learn from or remember in years to come. In this exercise, taken from psychotherapy, we as spectators work through our own traumas and mistakes, whilst also sharing them with the world, in an act of de-stigmatization. Acknowledging the difficulty of growing up in a world where so many expectations are imposed upon people from a young age, there is an acceptance here that the experience of navigating childhood and teenage years is different for everyone. In this moment, the burden of the past that we all carry to greater or lesser degrees is ever so slightly lightened, as perhaps was also the case for those people who narrated their stories for others to listen to during the performance.

The next stage of the journey takes us a short distance, to the entrance of the Chamber Stage of the Bol’shoi Theatre on Nikol’skaia Street. On the way we hear from a young man who reminisces about the 1990s: ‘В первой половине девяностых, все было заебись’, he tells us. He describes his life as a heroin addict in St Petersburg in the latter half of the decade, after control of the city’s drug cartel had

been taken over by the police who, he claims, flooded the market with cheap heroin. He then vividly describes his experiences in state rehabilitation programmes, which range from ineffectual group therapy sessions to beatings and starvation in solitary confinement. He also reflects on the practice of sending addicts to do forced labour on construction sites in monasteries without pay, which, he says, only makes a person's mental and physical health worse. Regarding the state's approach to therapy, he says, 'Единственная задача – это подчинить'. Having entered the code word found in the third ziplock packet – 'терапия' – into the chat-bot, I am then tasked with giving away or exchanging one of my possessions with a stranger. As the bot explains, this is intended to replicate the experience that drug users go through when they must traumatically trade their own belongings to serve their addiction. The message ends with the words: 'Возможно это сделать будет сложно и вы ощутите дискомфорт – это то, что нужно'. This is perhaps the best possible summary description of the artistic approach that the creative team take towards the spectator experience in *Рейв* 228. Indeed, taking people out of their comfort zone is the Gruz 300 approach in general. Its work is always oriented towards first locating boundaries and then probing them – both the personal boundaries of each individual spectator, and the boundaries of the social body as a whole. 'Дискомфорт' is the Gruz 300 device for achieving this.

The final three audio tracks all contain verbatim accounts of police falsification through the planting [подброс] of drug packets similar to the ones we spend the afternoon searching the city for. We hear from a young man who describes how drugs were planted on him by the police and the subsequent falsification of the criminal case against him, using fake witnesses employed full-time by the state prosecution. He concludes by questioning how someone like him can be noticed and

campaigns for when there is such a stigmatization of those convicted under article 228 in the country. We hear another story, again from a young man. He is a political activist and social campaigner. The police planted over a hundred grams of marijuana in his car, only after they had tried to stuff the packet into the back pocket of his trousers and failed on account of it being too large. He was found guilty and given real time in prison in spite of many inconsistencies in the evidence against him. This story bears striking similarities to that of Ojub Titiev in Chechnya, whose case was the subject of the documentary play *Оюб* in Chapter One, demonstrating that this is a widespread blueprint for falsification across the country. This young man says how 228 is the easiest article to convict someone under, and how it is impossible to prove your innocence if charges are brought against you. Police can always easily fabricate evidence, and ‘дежурные понятые’ will always testify against you in court. He was given a three-and-a-half-year suspended sentence, with consequent burdens on normal life, restrictions on travel, and difficulty in finding a job. He says he now has serious health problems after a year and three months spent in high-security jail [СИЗО] whilst his case was ongoing, as a result of which he now needs medical care, but he plans to continue his social activism regardless. He is still on occasion lost for words regarding what happened to him, rhetorically asking, ‘Неужели можно было просто вот так взять и сломать человеку жизнь и [...] по 228 повесить?’

The next testimony comes from a middle-aged woman who describes how marijuana and heroin were planted on her husband by the police when they were leaving their apartment. Her husband subsequently spent two months in jail, where the police forced him to admit to a crime under article 228, allegedly threatening to send their children to an orphanage if he refused. They also planted leaflets in his bag promoting the Ukrainian nationalist group *Pravii sektor* and accused him of

extremism. ‘Понятые’ were used to confirm that the man had been distributing such leaflets, although during the trial none of them could even correctly identify what the accused had looked like at the time. At the time of the performance (autumn 2019), he was being threatened with a minimum eight-year sentence in prison under article 228. The woman was doing her best to help her husband, but she felt that there was very little she could do. She concluded her narrative despondently, ‘А у меня вроде есть какой-то выбор здесь? Конечно нет’. This monologue is followed by a dark, brooding electronic track with haunting vocals by Sasha Starost’, who sings in the refrain, ‘я суд, [...] я бог теперь, я бог теперь...’

Having located the next packet and entered the code word ‘вина’, I receive instructions to retrieve from my pack the second sheet of A4 paper, which turns out to be a ‘wanted’ poster. Printed on the paper is an image of a young woman with her face scrubbed out, and an accompanying text below, which reads:

Разыскивается

Человек для подброса наркотиков

Возможно это твой сосед/ка

Награда: 100 000 рублей

МВД по району Тверской

It turns out that this particular ‘закладка’ was hidden directly across the street from a local branch of the district police department. The instructions were to pin the poster either on or in the vicinity of the police building, or to hand it to a passer-by and explain about the problem of falsifications under article 228. On the one hand, this could not be seen as anything other than a direct provocation, but on the other hand it

was a chance for every spectator to become an Actionist for a brief moment, and to stage a micro-protest right then and there in the middle of the performance. The danger was undeniable, but the act was empowering, and functioned as something of a democratization of Actionism, which is usually carried out exclusively by the artists themselves. What we can see at work here in these micro-actions carried out by theatre spectators rather than performance artists is the artist becoming the facilitator rather than the sole actor in the performance. This is reflective of broader trends in contemporary performance practices grounded in participation, where responsibility for the action is delegated from the artist to the spectator-participant. It also suggests a shift in the perception of what constitutes an Actionist ‘action’. If Actionism previously meant the grand gesture of the artist or artists, who took full responsibility and full credit for it, the appearance of the radically participatory ‘Actionist theatre’ signified a ‘social turn’ in Russian Actionism at the end of the second decade of the century. In words that could be said of the Actionist theatre of Gruz 300 in 2019, art historian and critic Claire Bishop writes regarding the ‘social turn’ in European art of the 1990s:

The artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of *situations*; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term *project* with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a ‘viewer’ or ‘beholder’, is now repositioned as a co-producer or *participant*.⁵⁵

With the artist as producer of situations and the spectator as participant, we see in *Рейв 228* the re-establishment of the connection between two associations of the word ‘акция’ – an artistic act or gesture performed by artists in public space on the one

⁵⁵ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 2. Italics in original.

hand, and collective political activity by a social group or groups on the other – with all the possibilities for inclusive, broad-based direct action that open up as a result.

Hurriedly fleeing the scene after sticking my poster to an urn opposite the police station, I head in the direction of Tverskaia metro station in search of the next packet, which is hidden deep underground on one of the train platforms. Once more plugged in to my smartphone, I listen to a middle-aged woman recount how her daughter was unjustly convicted under article 228, how the police planted the substances in an envelope in her handbag whilst she was in the toilet of the police station, and how ‘понятые’ were again employed to give evidence supporting the prosecution’s version of events. Since then the mother has studied the legal system and how falsifications are carried out, and she now runs a small NGO helping people who fall into similar problems with the law enforcement agencies. She has already personally assisted in defending 173 similar cases of falsification. She describes how frightening it is to learn of the true scale of the problem and of the huge number of people in the country who are imprisoned on falsified charges. She says that the problem is not only with article 228, because the police can plant other things on people and will always win in court. Once the authorities falsify a case against you, she says, ‘ты человек подневольный, тебя осудят, тебя принудят, и отдадут в рабство этой системе, чтобы ты там работал, прокладывая дороги двенадцать часов [в день].’

The packet turned out to be hidden under a metro noticeboard, and finding it drew the attention of passers-by. Fortunately, there were no police or Rosgvardiia in sight. Boarding the next train and heading south to Zamoskvorech’e district as instructed, I listen to the final audio file on the way, which is narrated by a young woman called Nastia Marochkina. She recounts how when she was a teenager her

mother and stepfather were taken away in the night by the police and she was left at home alone. They spent two years in detention just waiting for the conclusion of the court case. Her mother and stepfather were subsequently given ten years in prison each under article 228. The young girl was taken in by her biological father and his new family. Social stigma surrounding article 228 made it impossible for her to discuss what had happened with anyone. When she tried to tell a school friend, she was accused of lying and making things up. She describes her subsequent struggles with depression and alcohol abuse. At the time of narration, her mother had already served six years of her sentence in a maximum security prison in Mordovia, and was fifty five years old. Nastia describes her visits to the prison, the tears and arguments she often has with her mother when she is there, and how she brings her food products from a list that her mother sends to her in advance. Her mother often requests black bread, which it is not permitted to bring inside the prison because something could be hidden inside. After locating the next packet hidden in a hole in the wall adjacent to a branch of the Magnoliia supermarket chain, and having entered the key word ‘мама’ into the chat-bot, I receive a photograph of one of the letters that Nastia was sent by her mother. Certain words have been highlighted – they are the food products that Nastia’s mother would like her daughter to bring on her next visit to Mordovia. The spectator’s task is to purchase any item listed in the letter and bring it to the location of the final set of coordinates, which it turns out is somewhere inside Paveletskii train station, a short walk away. The chat-bot provides one more audio file to fill the few minutes required to get there. This time there is no speaking; just a dark, pulsating German techno track – *So Heisser Es Wird*, by Schwefelgelb. The rave had started.

In contrast to most train stations in the UK nowadays, it is still possible to walk without a ticket on to railway platforms in Russia, where it is not uncommon to

see entire families gathered to greet or send off a single relative. As I and a handful of other spectators entered Paveletskii station at the same time, we searched for the platform that matched the one in the photograph. At a certain point, music became audible, and following its direction brought us to a gathering of people in the middle of a long, narrow platform, hemmed in on either side by two stationary trains. Sasha Starost' was in the middle of the group, dressed all in black with a sequin mask and bright red streaks under her eyes. She was playing a small, handheld barrel organ, whilst chanting verses repeatedly, in mantra-like fashion. Stas Gorev, in black leather jacket, played an accordion, whilst multiple spectators had also been enlisted to play various small instruments, such as tingsha cymbals, singing bowls, maracas, panpipes, and tambourines. A young woman, also dressed all in black, complete with a black headscarf tied under her chin, stood motionless and expressionless in the centre of it all, staring vacantly into the middle distance. On her outstretched palms lay a loaf of ordinary black bread. In what was an unexpected moment of Teatr.doc-style 'свидетельский театр', it turned out that this was Nastia Marochkina herself, who had narrated the story of her mother and the favourite black bread she is forbidden in prison, which we had heard through our headphones not long before. At Nastia's feet there is a large tartan-patterned laundry bag, with a sign leant against it: 'алтарь 228'. This is the final key word, which I enter into my chat-bot and in reply receive instructions to sacrifice the food that I bought in the shop at the 'алтарь 228'. All the donations will be taken to Nastia's mother in prison in Mordovia. The gesture of donating real food to a real person who is presently suffering under the injustice of article 228 is both symbolic and real simultaneously. Having donated to Nastia's mother, spectators have done something to help one of the victims of falsification in a concrete way, however small. This is the theatre of direct action in which a tangible

result is produced, and in which a face-to-face interaction is facilitated between spectator-as-consumer and one of the real individuals whose story lies at the base of the performance. This moment, therefore, is an irruption of the real through the symbolic in the act of the performance-turned-ritual sacrifice.

Nenasheva calls the work of Gruz 300 ‘акционистский театр’. This is a succinct description, but it is not quite Actionism in the familiar sense of the word. The work of Gruz 300 is closer to Anglo-American ‘socially engaged practice’, in which ‘the social interaction is at some level the art’.⁵⁶ The presence of Marochkina herself on the train platform for the finale, which linked the symbolic and the real in the performance, has a precedent in Nenasheva’s work: in her 2016 action ‘Наказание’, she brought a disabled teenager from an orphanage to Red Square and retied the bandages on his bedsores in public. The interaction of symbolic and real gesture in both ‘Наказание’ and *Peйв 228* made them aesthetically and discursively generative as artistic works. Ritual used in this way is clearly important to the performance practices of Nenasheva and the Gruz 300 collective. Its function as a confrontation with and short-circuiting of mediatised ‘spectacle’ (Debord) is integral to the discourse of *Peйв 228*. The centrality of ritual as a device is made clear in the final message from the chat-bot, which serves as both a liberating incantation and as an epitaph to the performance:

В мире, где не остаётся надежды на закон, поможет магия. Обряд – это коллективная практика, которая невозможна без твоего участия. Обряд – это доисторический акционизм. Разбуди духов предков, приготовься к освободительному танцу. И запомни эти слова: на сегодня они наша молитва.

⁵⁶ Tom Finkelpearl, quoted in ‘Art Terms: Socially Engaged Practice’, *Tate Online* <<http://circuit.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/socially-engaged-practice>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

Я не хочу
 Принимать передачи
 Я не хочу
 Носить униформу
 Я не хочу
 Полицейскую йогу
 Я не хочу

От уз и темницы от всякого вреда
 Освободи каждого навсегда

Избавь нас рейв
 От хозяйственной сумки
 Избавь нас рейв
 От всевидящих камер
 Избавь нас рейв
 От казённых тарелок
 Избавь нас рейв
 От ключей звенящих

От уз и темницы от всякого вреда
 Освободи каждого навсегда
 Во имя отца и сына и святого ФСИН.⁵⁷

The words of this so-called ‘молитва’, which are a modern ode to freedom and justice, are chanted by the whole group, performers and spectators alike, during the ritual sacrifice – the donation of provisions at the ‘алтарь 228’. The ritual is thus reinforced by an incantatory practice that serves as a substitute for ‘надежда на закон’. The lack of confidence that society has in the legal system to protect citizens or to act in their interests is thus reflected in *Рейв 228* by a turn to ritual and magic. The rite [обряд] that is appealed to in the prayer is, according to the performers, a ‘prehistoric Actionism’, which requires the participation of the whole group as a ‘collective practice’. To repeat Beumers and Lipovetsky’s paraphrasing of Victor Turner, the ritual is ‘designed to restore and recreate sacral meanings and

⁵⁷ ФСИН (Федеральная служба исполнения наказаний) is the state organ in charge of prisons and the penal system as a whole in the Russian Federation.

corresponding psychological conditions in concrete social and cultural circumstances'.⁵⁸ The ritual in the Actionist theatre of Gruz 300 thus serves as the mechanism by which the artists' social practice is materialised, in which new meanings and psychological conditions are created that resist the widespread police practices of 'подброс', falsification, and wrongful imprisonment.

In spite of Nenasheva's insistence that it is never her aim to attract the attention of the police, to my knowledge none of her major Actionist works have passed by without incident. On numerous occasions they have ended in her being arrested, and even on one occasion in an attempt to section her ('Между здесь и там').⁵⁹ *Peÿb 228* was no exception to this rule, as the ritual finale on the train platform was interrupted by police officers, who randomly singled out co-creator Konstantin Chaplii and tried to take him in for a 'досмотр' – the very same procedure which led to the framing and imprisonment of many of those figures whose testimonies we had heard earlier in the show. This incident with the police at the conclusion of the performance was ironically demonstrative of the problem that the work was trying to address – the unaccountability and arbitrariness of the actions of state law enforcement agencies, and the destruction of the lives of innocent people that occurs as a result. After long explanations, negotiations, and collective pressure, the police officers eventually conceded – perhaps deciding that there were too many witnesses – and instead disbanded the unsanctioned gathering of people, thus bringing the performance to an all-too-fitting close. It is clear, however, that Chaplii was lucky to escape so lightly that time, and with the *Peÿb 228* first-hand testimonies still fresh in our minds, the encounter with the police served as a painful reminder of the fact

⁵⁸ Beumers & Lipovetsky, p. 41.

⁵⁹ See Sulim.

that the vast majority of people who come up against the article-228 machine are rarely so fortunate.

This moment was cause for reflection on the work as a whole, and particularly on the wisdom of putting a group of young people in real danger of a misunderstanding with the same corrupt police and legal justice system that has undone the lives of hundreds of thousands of people around the country just like them.⁶⁰ As one journalist covering the event wrote:

Идя на спектакль, нужно понимать, что специфика темы подразумевает осторожность со стороны самого участника, который условно примеряет на себя роль наркопотребителя. Также нужно понимать и то, что в современной России спровоцировать сотрудника полиции на действия может что угодно, даже выход на пробежку не в том месте.⁶¹

As was also seen in the three documentary plays that featured in Chapter One, arbitrary injustice is a widespread phenomenon that does not discriminate. If Chapter One primarily focused on political prisoners, then the two works so far in this chapter have borne witness to the less visible human cost of ‘полицейский произвол’ in High Putinist Russia, and the cases of ordinary people who have fallen foul of the system. With its raw, unpolished participatory performance practices, the Gruz 300 collective began to develop effective mechanisms for directly engaging with and confronting this phenomenon through theatre.

⁶⁰ It should be stated that the finale of *Reiv 228* was only performed once more outside in public space in Moscow, subsequently moving behind closed doors where such problems with the police were less likely to arise.

⁶¹ Leva Levchenko, “‘Reiv № 228’: Kak spektakl’, na kotorom ishchut zakladki, rasskazyvaet o narkopotreblenii v Rossii’, *The Village*, 16 October 2019 <<https://www.the-village.ru/village/weekend/weeknd-theatre/364687-gruz-228>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

Россия 20:20

In contrast to the preceding eleven works examined in detail, the final work under consideration here is not ‘theatre’ as such, and did not call itself theatre. The hope is that this work will demonstrate something of the erasure of concretely determinable boundaries when it comes to experimental theatre making in contemporary Russia at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century. This work calls itself a ‘hyper-reality show’ [гипер-реалити шоу], a description which indicates towards the content of the show as being more ‘real’ than a typical reality TV show. There are two components to the show: live action, which is streamed online in real time; and an interactive game, which is played on a smartphone simultaneously. The name *Россия 20:20* refers to three things: firstly, the impending new year at the time in late 2019; secondly, the twenty-twenty vision of human eyes; and finally, a point scoring system in a game. The show was conceived to mimic the stereotypical format of a reality TV show, in which there are multiple episodes and seasons. At the time of writing in late 2020, only one season had been realised, in part due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, which made continuation of the project in 2020 impractical, and in part due to Nenasheva’s view that the project had been something of a failure.⁶²

Each season was conceived as having a different generic character type in the lead role, with character types chosen for their social universality and symbolic capital. In what sounds like the beginning of a High Putinist-era joke, the characters planned for future seasons included ‘the policeman’, ‘the priest’, and ‘the activist’. Owing to Nenasheva’s diagnosis with depression shortly before the launch of the

⁶² Katrin Nenasheva, Unpublished interview with author, online, 2020.

project, the first season was played by a character suffering from depression, and was accordingly subtitled ‘Россия депрессивная’. This first – and so far only – season of *Россия 20:20* contained eleven episodes, of which eight were played by Nenasheva herself, and three were played by invited artists who also had histories of depression. They were Nika Nikul’shina (third episode), Olia Kuracheva (fourth episode), and Sasha Starost’ (tenth episode). All of these episodes were live-streamed online, on Nenasheva’s Facebook page. Whilst this ensured a high level of visibility and accessibility (Nenasheva had nearly five thousand Facebook followers at the time), it was not the most reliable or stable of streaming platforms and most episodes were affected by technical difficulties to some degree. The advantage of this platform, however, is that the streamed videos remain in place indefinitely, for as long as Facebook exists or until the user removes the posts. Although it is not easy to scroll back months or years to find old posts, they are there nonetheless and can be found if desired. Nenasheva speaks frankly about how she uses Facebook and other social media platforms as her virtual gallery space, in the absence of any possibilities for displaying her work in physical gallery spaces following the aforementioned ‘Грыз 300’ exhibition scandal at Galereia na Solianke. Whilst its limitations are many, the advantage that this virtual gallery of Nenasheva’s has is that it cannot be removed or censored (at least not by Роскомнадзор) and is theoretically permanent, thereby functioning as both personal gallery and archive simultaneously. It has this in common with YouTube, as seen in the context of *YouTube/В полиции* in Chapter Two. What we see with *Россия 20:20* is how a social media platform can also be the virtual stage for performance art, as the show is live-streamed online. The interactive game element of the show was operated through a Telegram chat-bot in conjunction with the livestream on Facebook, thus demonstrating how a combination of different

social media platforms and electronic devices can carry out the functions of stage, gallery, auditorium, prop, and archive of the artist's work simultaneously.

The meticulous documentation and digital archiving of the event – which also included still-image documentation by photographers with cameras during each episode – is reminiscent of the late-Soviet performance art collective Коллективные действия, whose performances were, according to art historian Boris Groys, ‘meticulously, almost bureaucratically documented, commented on, and archived’.⁶³ Bishop contrasts this with Western performance practice, where a deliberate lack of documentation and the resultant ephemerality of the event were considered tactics of resistance to ‘spectacle’, and to the commodification and commercialism of the art world.⁶⁴ However, the documentation and archiving of *Россия 20:20* serves a different purpose. The creators consider this to be a manifestation of their Actionist-activist artistic agenda, and as such the work should be open and accessible to as large an audience as possible, in order to raise maximal awareness of the issue in question – that of depression and mental health in contemporary Russia. The first season of *Россия 20:20* is too large to tackle in its entirety here, so I have chosen to focus on the second episode alone, which was played by Nenasheva and passed off with a minimum of technical issues. The first episode was played as an ‘offline session’, which meant that the game could only be played by an audience gathered in a specific place and was not open to anyone online, as all but one of the other episodes were. Thus, the second episode was also the first episode that could be played online by anyone, regardless of physical location. Episode Two is in many ways exemplary of all the subsequent episodes because the format of the ‘hyper-reality show’ did not change, although the content from episode to episode naturally did, so whilst it is

⁶³ Boris Groys, quoted in Bishop, p. 159.

⁶⁴ Bishop, p. 159.

worthwhile watching all of them, a good sense of the project as a whole can be grasped from this one episode alone.

One of the facts that we learn from the *Россия 20:20* website is that approximately eight million people suffer from or have suffered from depression in Russia, and yet this is rarely talked about and only half of this number will ever seek qualified help for their illness.⁶⁵ The source for this statistic is an article on the topic published by the newspaper *Kommersant* in 2017, in which it turns out that eight million is a conservative estimate and the real figure could be twice as high (around 11% of the population).⁶⁶ This is towards the high end of the World Health Organization's statistics for the global average (8-12% of the population). Galina Mazo, head of Endocrinological Psychiatry at the National Medical Research Centre of Psychiatry and Neurology in St Petersburg, estimates that seventy five per cent of people suffering from clinical depression in the country never receive any form of qualified help, meaning that for millions of people throughout the country their illness is left untreated, and often subsequently manifests itself in other ways (personal and/or social harm). Furthermore, men are half as likely to seek medical help compared to women, often turning to alcohol or substance abuse as an alternative. One of the tragic consequences of this can be self-harm and suicide, the latter of which was banned from public discourse in 2012 by the infamous law «О защите детей от информации, причиняющей вред их здоровью и развитию». It consequently became illegal to use the word 'suicide' in the print media and in online publications. This has led to the absurd situation where the word 'Роскомнадзор' has

⁶⁵ The *Россия 20:20* project website is currently inactive but previously existed at the address: <<https://russia2020.online/>>.

⁶⁶ See Vladimir Rubinskii, 'Vremia nervnykh: Kazhdyi desiatyi rossiianin – v depressii', *Kommersant*, 15 April 2017 <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3253726>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

become a euphemism in some independent media publications for suicide.⁶⁷ Mazo estimates that the majority of the approximately twenty thousand suicides per year in Russia are connected to depression. Russia's population is the ninth-largest in the world, and yet the country occupies third place in the world for the annual number of suicides, and first place for the number of men. The fact that this cannot be discussed openly in the media is not the only problem, according to Vladimir Rubinskii writing in *Kommersant*": 'Стратегии по предотвращению и профилактике суицидов в России, в отличие от европейских стран или США, нет'.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the chief cause of suicide – depression – is also something of a taboo topic generally, and little effort is made at the state level to address this: 'В России нет социальной рекламы, образовательных программ, объясняющих пациентам и родственникам, что делать при депрессии, куда обращаться'.⁶⁹ In this context, the work of grass-roots activists in filling the information- and support vacuum becomes especially important. As with the previous works in this chapter that tackled social themes – trauma and violence in *Груз 300*; the stigma surrounding narcotics and article 228 in *Рейв 228* – *Россия 20:20* aims to de-stigmatise depression, and to raise awareness of mental health issues, as well as pointing to the support that is available for those in need.

The promotional clip for the show takes the visual template of an old-school pixelated video game and integrates it with a video recording of Nenasheva in character, to create a hybridisation of media.⁷⁰ There are 'players', levels of difficulty, and various other optional settings. These do not have any actual bearing on the show

⁶⁷ This includes *Mediazona*, amongst others. See Arina Markelova and Al'bina Salakhova, 'Pochemu v Rossii ne priniato govorit' o suitsidakh', *FreeNews-Volga*, 10 September 2019 <<https://fn-volga.ru/news/view/id/131239>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁶⁸ Rubinskii.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Nenasheva could not identify the exact name of the game used as the graphics template, but it clearly derives from the Sega Mega Drive console era (1988-1997).

itself, but function more as affective *mise-en-scène*.⁷¹ To add to the game-like appearance of the show, the character – who is suffering from depression – wore a hangman’s noose around their neck for the duration of the game, as well as a kettlebell weight around their ankle (although the latter did not feature in all episodes). The noose represents the unfreedom, entrapment and suicidal inclinations of a person suffering from depression, and the kettlebell represents the emotional and physical burden that people commonly describe as analogous to the experience. Once more, we see invisible burdens and trauma as important themes in Nenasheva’s work. Although the noose and the kettlebell are somewhat crudely literal manifestations of psychological phenomena, they are nonetheless useful as symbolic conceptualisations of how people with depression feel, especially for those spectators who do not have a personal experience of mental illness. During the course of each episode, the audience – either a limited number assembled physically in a room, or a potentially unlimited number participating online – must participate in a number of multiple-choice polls in real time, each of which determines the action that the character takes in the real world. Each action carried out by the character has a corresponding effect on their state of well-being, and this is ranked from one to ten in three categories: 1) самобичевание; 2) прокрастинация; 3) асоциальность. If any of these three indicators reaches the maximum level of ten then the game is lost, and the episode ends. Likewise if these levels decrease and the character survives to the end without ‘maxing out’ any of the categories, then the game has been won and the character can remove the noose from their neck in a symbolic gesture of temporary victory over depression. Games are an increasingly prevalent feature of contemporary performance practices, for their power to affect and integrate a spectator-participant into a show in

⁷¹ The clip can be found on Nenasheva’s VKontakte page <https://vk.com/video181636730_456239070> [accessed 23 December 2020].

ways that conventional theatrical performance cannot.⁷² One typical episode from the first season of *Россия 20:20* will be considered in this context.

Episode Two took place on 15 October 2019. This episode can be played back on Nenasheva's Facebook page, although it is not intended for playback: without the interactive game element, it loses a significant part of its incorporative engagement with the viewer.⁷³ It had a running time of a little over an hour, and had a relatively modest number of online participants playing the game – between twenty to thirty people actively voting in the online polls at any one time. This contrasts with later episodes where sometimes one hundred to one hundred and fifty people were tuned in and participating. It clearly took some time for the word to spread and for the show to gather momentum. This episode began and ended with some technical difficulties, but it is worth noting that whilst the technical issues were ironed out over the course of the eleven iterations of the show, this did not necessarily equate to a better or more engaging experience for the spectator-player. Some of the most interesting moments in the show from a viewer's perspective occurred precisely at these points, when things were not quite going to plan. However, such moments were mostly of an incidental nature.

Whilst we waited for the technical issues with the live voting system to be resolved, Nenasheva took it upon herself to carry out a demonstration of one of the actions that had been proposed in the poll: to wash the street paving slabs. As she set about this task in the small square next to the Tret'iakov Gallery on Bol'shoi Tolmachevskii pereulok, she explained that it is common for people in a state of depression to perceive all their actions as pointless, even down to buying food for

⁷² See Lavender, pp. 183-89.

⁷³ The video was live-streamed on Nenasheva's Facebook page on 15 October 2019 and remains viewable <<https://www.facebook.com/katrin.nenasheva/videos/2394886124099141/>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

themselves. As such, the futile activity of washing paving slabs outwardly reflects the same pointlessness that is felt internally by someone in a state of depression. This is aimed at symbolically representing the experience of depression for an audience of people not suffering from it, and who are therefore not able to access the particular perception of the world that a sufferer inhabits. This action is exemplary of many of the choices of actions that spectator-participants must vote on in the game. It is often not immediately apparent why these choices are available or what purpose they serve, but it subsequently becomes so when the character performs the action, which in some way increases or reduces one of the three indicators (самобичевание, прокрастинация, асоциальность). The washing of the paving slabs, for example, relates to the category of 'прокрастинация'.

One of the aims of the game is to elicit interactions with random members of the public. This has three intentions, which are in turn performative, activist, and sociological: performative, to generate intrigue and live action for the viewer; activist, to initiate dialogue with Muscovites about the taboo topic of depression; and sociological, to find out what the public knows about depression and what their opinions and views are regarding it. Whilst there was usually at least one constructive, genuinely productive conversation in each episode, more often than not interactions with members of the public were short and unsuccessful, and these failures in themselves reflected the scale of the problem being addressed. People generally did not want to know, or were actively hostile towards any attempt at informing them. For example, when Nenasheva started to wash the paving slabs – whilst repeatedly muttering to herself the phrases 'прекрасная Собянинская плитка' and 'чтобы была лучше и чище' – an old woman approached her and told her to stop, commenting, 'Вы портите все'. Despite Nenasheva's attempts to engage the passer-

by in conversation, the old woman is not interested to learn why Nenasheva is performing this unusual activity. Instead, she waves her arm dismissively as she turns and walks away. Owing to the passer-by's lack of interest and refusal to talk, Nenasheva explains her actions to the camera instead, saying, 'Мне кажется это как раз то действие, которое описывает состояние человека в депрессии'. Nenasheva soon makes her way to a different street, following the orders dictated to her by the results of the polls in the now-functioning chat-bot. The kettlebell attached to her ankle is dragged along behind her, creating a shrill ringing sound as it bumps along the infamous paving slabs associated with Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobianin's 'благоустройство' of the city.⁷⁴ The gratingly dissonant noise it creates is perhaps cause for a momentary reflection on the human cost of the underfunding of mental healthcare in favour of expensive vanity projects such as Moscow's 'Моя улица' programme and other 'госпроекты'.⁷⁵

Other actions that were voted for by spectator-participants over the course of the episode include: make the acquaintance of a stranger (to decrease anti-sociality level); ask passers-by the question 'где выход от депрессии?' (most people refuse to answer, one middle-aged woman suggests trying antidepressants); eat chocolate (Nenasheva tries to share a bar of chocolate with passers-by, most of whom decline, but one young woman accepts and an interesting, productive conversation ensues on the theme of depression). Nenasheva is seemingly surprised when members of the public are reluctant to engage with her, perhaps forgetting the strangeness of her appearance – a hangman's noose around her neck and a kettlebell weight tied to her

⁷⁴ The phenomenon of 'благоустройство' – including Moscow's 'Моя улица' programme and Парк Зарядье – is considered by Michał Murawski in his article 'Falshfasad: Disavowed Infrastructure and Everyday Marxism in Putin's PPParadise', *American Ethnologist* (forthcoming). I am thankful to the author for sharing this paper with me prior to publication.

⁷⁵ The Russian state spends twenty seven times less on mental health per capita than the UK, for example. See Rubinskii.

ankle, in addition to a cameraman and a photographer following her every move. At a later stage, Nenasheva carries out the action ‘тушить об себя сигареты’. She explains to the camera that when conducting research for the project, the creators interviewed a number of people from all over Russia who suffer from depression, and one of the common ways that people resort to self-harm is through this action. This relates to the category of ‘самобичевание’, as she explains to the camera: ‘В таком состоянии, боли практически не чувствуешь’. These words recall those of the cult Moscow Actionist Oleg Mavromatti who, whilst nailed to a cross opposite the newly-built Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, was asked by a journalist what pain is, to which he replied, ‘Боль – это и есть настоящее искусство’.⁷⁶ In her attitude towards pain, it is clear that Nenasheva follows in the best artistic traditions of Actionism. The next action that Nenasheva must carry out is ‘выпить залпом’, so she retrieves a small bottle of ‘the cheapest vodka’ from her bag and proceeds to drink it whole, in spite of the obvious revulsion that she experiences. She comments that alcohol is strictly forbidden when suffering from depression, and that it will only make her condition worse, but she does it anyway because it has been voted for by those participating in the live polls. This was the point at which the ethical demand of the show became apparent. If we as spectators are really controlling the actions of a person suffering from depression, then that entails a certain responsibility for their welfare, and concomitantly an imperative as a group to vote for choices that should help the character in their navigation of the world for the duration of the game.

It is here that *Россия 20:20* firmly diverges from a conventional video game, in which ethical choices and moral responsibility as a player of the game are not

⁷⁶ This action was called ‘Не верь глазам’ and took place on 1 April 2000 at the Institute of Cultural Studies in Moscow. A video recording of the action can be found on Mavromatti’s Vimeo channel. See Ultrafuturo666, *Do Not Believe Your Eyes, 2000*, online video recording, Vimeo, 18 March 2011, <<https://vimeo.com/21220322>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

required, and indeed, in the case of games such as *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar Games, 1997), the point of the game is to transgress them. What we experience in the game world of *Россия 20:20* – not only as viewers looking at a screen but also as players making decisions that have a real effect on a real person in the real world – is that our ‘moral agency’ (to borrow the term of participatory theatre makers ZU-UK) as empathetic human beings is activated in the process.⁷⁷ What noticeably occurred mid-way through the episode is that the actions voted for by the audience became more benign. These included singing the national anthem in the middle of the street, and helping a stranger carry their bags. The latter action produced the absurd situation where Nenasheva insisted on helping a young woman who was perfectly capable of carrying her own bags, and subsequently struggled to keep up with her because of the heavy weight of the kettlebell tied to her ankle that she had to painfully drag along behind her. This action unexpectedly induced the most productive dialogue of the whole episode as the pair discussed the project and the problem of depression. The young woman was visibly affected by what she heard and thanked Nenasheva as she went on her way, with the departing words ‘звезды сошлись’. This incident best demonstrated the point of the project, and the tangible effects that it can have on three fronts: on the spectator-participant; on the real person behind the character whose actions are being controlled; and on the members of the public with whom interactions occur. Regrettably, such positive interactions of this kind were few and far between, and it is for this reason that Nenasheva considered the project a failure.⁷⁸

What turned out to be the final action of the episode was a phone call to Роскомнадзор, to ask the question ‘Зачем вы существуете?’ Nenasheva managed to get through to an operator, who initially struggled to understand the question, but

⁷⁷ Ramos and others, p. 210.

⁷⁸ Nenasheva, Unpublished interview, 2020.

upon the second time of asking responded with the words, ‘Я не знаю. Вопрос некорректен’, after which they immediately hung up the phone. Fittingly for a conversation with the censorship board, at this point the technology failed and the livestream cut out. Shortly afterwards, Nenasheva posted a video in the chat-bot explaining that she had taken the decision to end the game after the livestream cut out, and that we had succeeded in saving the character’s life because none of the three indicators had maxed out. Whilst the scoring system is vague and seemingly arbitrary (it is not clear how it is determined or by whom), this does not detract from the overall experience of the game. What is clear is that – unlike a conventional video game – this game is not played purely for its own sake. It is played to generate a greater understanding and awareness of a specific social phenomenon that concretely exists in the world. It is also designed to de-stigmatize and initiate discussion in the public sphere about a taboo topic. On the one hand, this could be viewed as an instrumentalisation of art and video games, but on the other, the show successfully hybridises various technological and artistic media to effectively engage and incorporate spectators into its world, whilst activating their ‘moral agency’ during the performance as an ethical choice.

The rise of performance art and the associated field of performance studies has had a profound impact on the world of theatre over the past half a century, and continues to do so. However, in spite of what performance artists such as Abramović themselves might suggest, the reverse is also true. Theatre has had a strong influence on performance art (and art more generally), in what is a mutually generative relationship.⁷⁹ The convergence of these previously opposed fields and the resulting

⁷⁹ Art historian Claire Bishop made an attempt to re-write the history of contemporary art from a theatre perspective in her book *Artificial Hells*. She states in the opening pages, ‘It is

hybridisation has made interdisciplinary research possible on the area where they overlap. *Россия 20:20* is located on this ground – a work that does not claim to be theatre and has no aspirations to be so, yet nonetheless can be productively placed in the broader landscape of contemporary theatre, where it can form a useful part of the debate. There is little to separate the Actionist theatre of the Gruz 300 collective from Nenasheva's online game show project *Россия 20:20*, the primary difference being that the works of Gruz 300 took place in the physical presence of spectators, whereas *Россия 20:20* was online. Other than that, as interactive participatory performances, they functioned in much the same way. Given that these works were made by artists rather than theatre makers, it is perhaps unsurprising that they do not look and feel like conventional theatre. However, this ignores their striking similarity with Teatr.doc-style 'свидетельский театр', which is clearly present in all of them and which is fundamental to the power of the 'real' that they are each able to generate. 'Свидетельский театр', therefore, can be seen as a discursive bridge between theatre and performance in the 2010s.

In words that could almost have been written about the three performance works made in 2019 explored in this chapter, Bishop describes the work of Коллективные действия in the late 1970s and 1980s:

What CAG's works gave rise to, then, was [...] difference, dissensus, and debate; a space of privatized experience, liberal democratic indecision, and a plurality of hermeneutical speculation at a time when the dominant discourse and spectatorial regime was marshalled towards a rigidly schematized apparatus of meaning.⁸⁰

hoped that these chapters might give momentum to rethinking the history of twentieth-century art through the lens of theatre rather than painting or the ready-made.' Bishop, p. 3.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 160.

In spite of Nenasheva's view of the project as a failure, *Россия 20:20* worked on the same principle described above, opening up a space for 'difference, dissensus, and debate' through its direct intervention into public space. If in *Груз 300* and *Рейв 228* the intervention was into the discursive space of theatre as a medium and was mostly a private experience for the groups of spectators, then in *Россия 20:20* the target was television and mass media, and the aim was to engage the general public. As 'real' reality TV to the extent that such a thing is possible before becoming documentary, it both exposed the fallacy of conventional reality TV in all its spectacular artificiality, and engaged the public in a frank discussion about a widespread illness, information about which is acutely lacking. In this way, *Россия 20:20* broke through the surface of the mediatised 'spectacle', which is the illusion of reality created by state propaganda and mass media.

To the question of why performance in public space is so important to Actionism, Nenasheva said in relation to her 2017 action 'Между здесь и там':

Почему мне важна работа с открытым пространством — сама социальная, политическая, культурная ситуация в стране диктует происходящее, открывает новые сюжеты и пути, создает эти диалоги. То, что получилось — сюрреалистично, но это не было постановкой.⁸¹

Nenasheva's insistence here that the word 'постановка' did not apply to her work is typical of performance artists in general who – like Abramović said above – are keen to avoid what they perceive as the artifice or 'fakeness' of theatre. In the context of *Россия 20:20*, it is undeniable that the most engaging interactions occurred spontaneously, with random members of the public, even though there was still a degree of set-up involved to bring about these moments. It was here that the humanity and the singularity of the event became most tangible. Every one of the people who

⁸¹ Nenasheva, in Sulim.

entered the camera frame, however briefly, had a story to tell about the society and the world in which they lived at that moment in time. These stories were expressed not only in words but also in glances, gestures, facial expressions, and visual appearance. The interactions that occurred were not always pretty – indeed they often reaffirmed certain negative social stereotypes – but in amongst them were moments of kindness, life-affirming sociality, and cooperation: human interactions that gave hope and cultivated feelings of community rather than stoking fear, division, and hate. This directly related to the problem that *Россия 20:20* was aiming to address. As Aleksandr Asmolov of the psychology faculty at Moscow State University explains in relation to the wave of depression in contemporary Russia:

Когда постоянно напоминают: ищите врага, когда внушают, что кругом враги, и этот поток суггестий идет со всех каналов базового телевидения, то возникают страхи, повышенная тревожность, которая рано или поздно оборачивается депрессией.⁸²

Although not always successful, *Россия 20:20* confronted head on the ‘fear’ and ‘raised anxiety’ that pervades society in High Putinist Russia. It attempted this through open, honest dialogue with people on the streets of the capital, in the process showing a different kind of TV to the ‘поток суггестий’ that comes from state-media propaganda. Far from being a failure, the ‘hyper-reality show’ demonstrated the potential power of art as a ‘socially engaged practice’ that can work constructively with audiences to build grass-roots support networks and community in the gaps which are too often and too easily fallen through.

⁸² Aleksandr Asmolov, quoted in Rubinskii.

The Actionist intervention into theatre and television shows early promise of being one of the most significant new developments in the performing arts in Russia in recent years. Like the arrival of documentary theatre two decades ago at the very start of the Putin era, the fledgling Actionist theatre perhaps demonstrates some of that same potential to revitalise the possibilities for theatre, and to open up new aesthetic pathways for theatre makers to explore new ways of making sense of the world around them. There are undoubtedly things that both Actionists and theatre makers can learn from each other, but with High-Putinist Capitalist Realism set to be the dominant order of things for Russians in the long term, the necessity of collaboration and mutual support in generating alternative narratives, dissensus, and the very possibility of conceiving of an alternative as such falls on them collectively.

Conclusion

Tracing the interaction of politics and aesthetics, a heterogeneous image of Russian theatre in the second decade of the twenty-first century has emerged over the course of this study. However, it is worth remembering that theatre production in Russia is still largely dominated by the state dramatic theatres. These theatres are wholly dependent on state funding for their existence, and due to the absence of an intermediary body between state and theatre (such as the Arts Council in the UK, for example), the sector is highly susceptible to the external pressure of financial and legislative censorship, which in turn generates a culture of self-censorship. This is evidenced by the fact that by and large the authorities do not need to interfere in the running of theatres, because they conform by themselves anyway. Nevertheless, independent and semi-independent theatre exists in Russia, as seen in the range of different theatrical experiments in this study, and it has continued to develop and innovate over the past decade. It is clear, though, that in the absence of sustained external investment, a lack of funds is stunting its growth and holding it back from achieving the depth and breadth that there is evidently the potential for.

The twelve works examined in detail across the preceding chapters were all responses in one way or another to external changes in the political and social realms. In this regard, they are products of their environment, which throughout this thesis has been called the period of High Putinism. This period started in 2012, following the conservative-reactionary turn that came with Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency for a third term, and which continues unabated at the time of writing in late 2020, mid-way through his fourth term. Considering the interplay of external socio-political factors with internal theatrical and artistic ones, a picture emerged of a theatre

ecology in contemporary Russia that simultaneously engaged with its environment whilst it innovated aesthetically. Indeed, as the works considered have demonstrated, the two are inseparable.

On the one hand, my selection of particular productions for inclusion was perhaps driven by an attraction to works that displayed this dialectical quality of art; works that reflected on the contradictions in society and culture in the present day, attempting to make some sense of the world around, whilst allowing themselves to be determined by and products of external events. On the other hand, many of the works chose themselves, as they stood out from the crowd by pushing the boundaries of theatre and subverting my own personal expectations. It is also true that a focus on the underrepresented field of text-decentred theatre came at the expense of many fine plays that have been written and performed over the past decade, which are the worthy subject of a separate study.

In Chapter One, three examples of documentary plays from recent years reflected the increasing politicisation of contemporary theatre in Russia (along with society more broadly), in response to the abuses of power and systemic violence that became the norm during Putin's third term in office. As Curtis points out, against a background of the continued curtailment of freedom of speech and other constitutional rights under Putin, documentary theatre acquired a 'function as a forum for the exploration of human rights issues'.¹ Whilst this is not the case for all documentary theatre produced in this period, and in fact works of such an overt political nature remain in the minority, they nonetheless stand out for their uncompromising pursuit of social and political accountability in the absence of an adequately functioning legal justice system. In this regard, Teatr.doc's 'civic theatre'

¹ J.A.E. Curtis, 'Introduction', in *New Drama in Russian: Performance, Politics and Protest in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), p. 1.

in some small measure holds the regime to account for its crimes and failings, whilst simultaneously offering a stark glimpse beneath the immaculate surface of the media image of Putin's Russia, constructed and maintained by the state propaganda machine and its censorship mechanisms. In the words of Mikhail Ugarov, if such plays achieve nothing else, then at the very least 'слово сказано будет'.²

Chapter Two embraces contemporary performance practices, associated with the hybridisation of theatrical conventions and the performing arts, including contemporary dance, variety, and musical theatre, which are combined with digital technology and other media to create works that do not conform to traditional categories or genres. What these works have in common is the use of documents as the foundational material for their experimental performance-based aesthetics. They are grounded in the 'real', as they take up documents of social and political significance and create text-decentred, hybrid performances, which nonetheless reflect certain common concerns: the civil rights enshrined in the Constitution, the social malevolence of patriarchy, and police power. These three seemingly disparate works of theatre demonstrate a 'new documentarism', which is an expanded field of documentary practice that proves the continued capacity of the genre for renewal and evolution, some two decades after its emergence as a major force in Russian culture.

In Chapter Three, we saw three examples of new playwriting that are reflective of contemporary drama. Each in its own way responded to the crisis of subjectivity in High Putinist society, by interrogating conformity to ideologically prescribed notions of tradition and normality, particularly in relation to questions of sexuality, gender, and beauty. Each play made different attempts at the de-

² Mikhail Ugarov, in 'Istoriia Sergeia Magnitskogo na stsene teatra v spektakle "Chas vosemnadtsat"', *Radio Ekho Moskvy*, 5 June 2010
<<https://echo.msk.ru/programs/kulshok/684833-echo/>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

hierarchisation of social power structures, with varying outcomes. If *Человек из Подольска* demonstrated the inherent violence of enforcing ideological consensus, then *Философы* and *28 дней* favoured a radical equality of plural subjectivities. Where the former work portrayed an all-too-real dystopian world, the latter two works reflected the utopian trend in dissensual art, which is not utopian in the literal sense of being divorced from reality, but is rather grounded in the concrete. They proposed material alternatives to the status quo that are firmly within the realms of the possible and the imaginable, ultimately expressing a rejection of the High-Putinist Capitalist Realist message of ‘альтернативы нет’.

Chapter Four followed what happened when a group of performance artists turned their hands to theatre making, which became in turn a reflection on the boundaries of contemporary theatre itself. These boundaries were also examined from the other side, as it were, through consideration of a work of performance art that did not pertain to be theatre and could not be called theatre, yet had certain characteristics in common that made for a productive comparison. The very public nature of Russian Actionism makes it one of the most politically provocative forms of artistic expression in post-Soviet Russian culture. If Moscow Actionism originally emerged as a rejection of late Soviet ‘Neo-Academism’, then the Actionist theatre of the Gruz 300 collective can likewise be seen as an intervention into the world of the theatre that rejects its norms and conventions, in favour of non-representational performative modes and participatory practices. To refer back to the prologue, Actionist theatre is fundamentally ‘против системы Станиславского’. This it has in common with the ‘post-zero’ documentary plays of Chapter One, and the performance-based ‘new documentarism’ of Chapter Two, as well as with certain formal and stylistic qualities

of the dramas in Chapter Three, particularly the Brechtian staging of the modern Classical Greek tragedy *28 дней*.

A uniting thread in these seemingly disparate modes of theatre making is the device of ‘witness theatre’, which appears at various times and to varying degrees, demonstrating a common concern for the ‘real’ in contemporary Russian theatre. ‘Witness theatre’ – which is a manifestation of the current global trend for the ‘theatre of the real’ – causes an irruption of the ‘real’ into the world of the performance. The ‘real’ becomes an effective way of cutting through the mediatised ‘spectacle’ that sustains the illusion of the status quo as the natural order of things. It is for its power to circumvent censorship – and to generate alternate ways of seeing, thinking and doing through a confrontation with the ‘real’ – that the device of ‘witness theatre’ is used effectively in a number of these works.

The controversial constitutional reforms of 2020 have paved the way for Putin to remain in power until 2036, which would make him the longest-serving Russian leader in modern history, surpassing Stalin. For this reason, the restrictions and repressions that characterise the era of High Putinism – and its accompanying cultural policy, Capitalist Realism – remain the reality for theatre makers in Russia for the foreseeable future. The response from nonconformist theatre makers has been to continue to critique the underlying structures that sustain the status quo. *Карусель капитализма* at the Meyerhold Centre, for example, broke ground by seriously discussing the effects of neoliberal capitalism on theatre production, and the precarious labour that the industry exploits. This was the follow-up work from the creative team behind *Locker room talk* (with the addition of choreographer Alena Papina from *Конституция*), thus demonstrating the productive relationships being built amongst a core group of female theatre makers, who are not afraid to critique the

economic system as well as patriarchy.³ Such works are only likely to become a more frequent occurrence as the millennial generation – who do not carry the traumatic memories of the difficult transition from socialism to capitalism – reaches full maturity. This generation has grown up with the internet, and in its outlook and social attitudes is hardly distinguishable from its European counterparts.⁴ Eventually it will come to supersede the ageing Soviet generation embodied by Putin, which remembers and yearns for the glories of empire.

When the last work that featured in this study – *Россия 20:20* – took place in the final months of 2019, no one could have foreseen that a few months later all theatres would be closed and cultural life put on hold, as the country went into a national lockdown in the spring of 2020. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic brought theatre life practically to a standstill for most of the year, drawing a line under the theatre of the second decade of the twenty-first century and having as yet unknown consequences for the theatre of the decade ahead. Although theatres were allowed to re-open in early summer, the so-called ‘second wave’ of the epidemic forced new restrictions to be introduced, and at the end of 2020 theatres were still only permitted to operate at twenty five per cent audience capacity (although in some of the worst-hit regions theatres were closed once more). In spite of theatres partly reopening, however, many would-be spectators were reluctant to attend at all, faced as they were with a moral-epidemiological dilemma whilst the epidemic raged on. The desire to support the theatres and the artists was counterbalanced by the general

³ *Карьер капитализма* was made by Ada Mukhina, Alena Papina, Ol’ga Tarakanova, and Dar’ia Iuriichuk. It premiered at the Meyerhold Centre in September 2019. See the Meyerhold Centre website <<http://meyerhold.ru/karies-kapitalizma>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

⁴ Maria Snegovaya, Denis Volkov, and Stepan Goncharov, ‘What Would It Take for Russia’s Millennials to Topple Putin’, *Foreign Policy*, 6 October 2020 <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/06/russian-millennial-putin-regime-dissatisfied-apolitical-reform/>> [accessed 23 December 2020].

distrust of the government and its handling of the crisis, which was only exacerbated by the suspicion that public gatherings of any kind, especially indoors, posed a potentially life-threatening risk to one's health. State financial support for the sector was not forthcoming during the pandemic, as a result of which theatres found themselves hard up and forced into opening their doors, regardless of the risk involved.

The pandemic ruptured social and cultural life to such an extent that a line was drawn in time, between pre- and post-COVID. This has had the unexpected effect of turning this study into a historical documentation of the final days and years of the pre-COVID era in contemporary Russian theatre. Once theatre life fully recovers from the damage caused by the pandemic – which could realistically take a few years – the world will already be a different place, and it seems inevitable that post-COVID theatre in Russia will look and feel different to the theatre ecology described above, in turn reflecting and responding to the new concerns and priorities of the day. Nonetheless, it will doubtless show the same vitality and critical incisiveness that has characterised its enduring appeal in the twenty-first century thus far.

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