



**URALS PATHFINDER:**  
THEATRE IN POST-SOVIET  
YEKATERINBURG

Blair A. Ruble



**KENNAN INSTITUTE**  
OCCASIONAL PAPER # 307



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Cover photo (above): "Kolyada Theatre at Night, Turgenev Street, Ekaterinburg, Russia."

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Cover photo (below): "Daytime View of Kolyada Theatre, Turgenev Street, Ekaterinburg, Russia."

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I have employed the Library of Congress Transliteration System exclusively in the notes as well as generally in the text. However, alternative transliterations for several place and personal names have become widely accepted in British and American usage (e.g., Chelyabinsk instead of Cheliabinsk; Bogayev instead of Bogaev; Kolyada instead of Koliada; Lukyanin instead of Luk'ianin; Presnyakov instead of Presniakov; and, most important, Yekaterinburg instead of Ekaterinburg). I have used more generally accepted transliterations in the text in such instances.



# URALS PATHFINDER: THEATRE IN POST-SOVIET YEKATERINBURG

If you don't close your eyes from time to time, you can see these miracles.

—*Agata Kristi Rock Band, from "Oni Letaiat,"*  
on the album *Chudesa Miracles, 1998*

The mood in London the third week of March 2002 had been sour. Tony Blair was ploughing ahead to join his friend George W. Bush in a seemingly unstoppable drive to invade Iraq. The Middle East already was in flames, as the Israelis besieged Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Ramallah compound. The World Meteorological Organization had released yet another, more strident, report warning about the dire consequences of global warming. The newspapers and television news shows had little to offer that could bring joy into anyone's life. At least the first signs of spring were taking hold, as rains early in the week gave away to clear skies with temperatures climbing into the upper 50s (when measured by the scale conceived by the good physicist Daniel Gabriel Fahrenheit).

At the edgy Royal Court Theatre on the city's tony Sloane Square, a young Russian playwright from beyond the Urals—twenty-five-year-old Vasili Sigarev—was offering a premiere play with a strange-sounding title that was said to hold the promise of a new era in Russian dramaturgy. And Sigarev, despite the entire hubbub surrounding his arrival in London, was but one among many young provincial playwrights who were setting Russian theatre on edge.<sup>1</sup> Together with dozens more authors who had come of age as the Soviet Union collapsed, Sigarev was seeking a voice for his country's post-Soviet confusion, violence, frustration, anger, and carnivalesque debasement. Simultaneously, he and his colleagues had embraced more

eternal Russian beliefs in the salvation to be found in the impact of theatre as a sacral rite, in the potency of redemption, and in the transcendental power of the human soul.<sup>2</sup> The play by Sigarev premiering that night at the Royal Court—*Plasticine*—tried to square the circle between spiritual degradation and salvation.

*Plasticine* was not totally untried by the time it opened at the Royal Court. It had debuted in 2000, had won Sigarev the ironically revered Russian "Anti-Booker" Prize, and had already been performed at Moscow's prestigious Playwright and Director Center under the inspired direction of Kirill Serebrennikov.<sup>3</sup> The Royal Court, in turn, had committed itself to stage a full-fledged production after a successful reading of an English translation of the text a year before.<sup>4</sup>

In writing his play, Sigarev drew on his own life to set forth a shocking tale of violence, drunkenness, hypocrisy, humiliation, rape, sadistic sexual relations, aggression, and vengeance. The play's title is derived from the material with which the hero "first molds his double, then a phallus of socking size, and then the cast for a kuckleduster which he uses to avenge his aggressors."<sup>5</sup> Sigarev was a native Verkhnaia Salda, a small city of about 50,000 souls 120 miles or so north of the Urals city of Yekaterinburg. He had left home to study at the Nizhny Tagil Pedagogical Institute, before seeking out the master dramatist Nikolai Kolyada at the innovative Yekaterinburg Theatre Institute.<sup>6</sup> The city's cutting-edge theatre and cultural scene enveloped the small-town youth, who arrived just as the restrictions of Soviet life were crumbling before an onslaught led, in part, by Yekaterinburg's mercurial illustrious native son, Boris Yeltsin.

Yeltsin, Kolyada, and their local protégés enthusiastically embraced the advice of the American poet Walt Whitman to “unscrew the locks from the doors; unscrew the doors themselves from their jams!”<sup>7</sup> Kolyada—together with other talented local playwrights such as Sigarev, Oleg Bogayev, and the Presnyakov brothers—was busy preparing the ground for a revolution on the Russian stage, what would become known as Russia’s New Drama Movement, that would prove to be as profound as that unleashed in politics by their Urals brethren led by Yeltsin.

The Royal Court Theatre was a fully appropriate setting for bringing Russia’s New Drama Movement to arguably the most important theatrical city in the world.<sup>8</sup> The building itself dates from 1888, having been constructed on the site of the earlier New Chelsea Theater, which itself had opened in the converted Ranelagh Chapel eighteen years before. The sort of brick-and-stone confection typical of the era, the Royal Court Theatre attained a lagniappe of elegance thanks to its Italianate style and hierarchical arrangements of stalls, dress circle, amphitheatre, and gallery seating an audience of 841. The theatre became known for staging some of the most innovative plays of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, included several by George Bernard Shaw as well as a number of frolicking Gilbert and Sullivan musicals. But the Great Depression of the 1930s undercut its audience, so the owners switched to showing films until the roof collapsed under German bombs during World War II.

The theatre architect Robert Cromie renovated the Royal Court in 1952 for a smaller audience of 500, which, after 1956, proved to be the perfect size for George Devine’s English Stage Company. Devine and his actors made the Royal Court London’s premiere “writer’s theatre.” Beginning in the late 1950s—and continuing until today—the very best of contemporary writers and works have found their way to British audiences at the Royal

Court, with premieres of influential plays by the likes of Christopher Hampton, Athol Fugard, Howard Brenton, Caryl Churchill, Hanif Kureishi, Sarah Daniels, Timberlake Wertenbaker, Martin Crimp, Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Martin McDonagh, Simon Stephens, Leo Butler, and Edward Bond. They were joined by works from such established writers as Isaac Babel, Bertolt Brecht, Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Marguerite Duras, thereby cementing the Court’s reputation as perhaps the single most important English-language theatre in the world. In addition, the legendary *Rocky Horror Show* opened in the Court’s small sixty-three-seat studio Theatre Upstairs in 1973. As a result, Sigarev and his play were sure to be noticed simply by virtue of the fact that they were debuting on the boards of the Royal Court.

The initial critical reaction to Sigarev’s play was confused. Michael Billington of *The Guardian* was not impressed. “But the real problem,” Billington wrote, “is that [the] play never analyses the source of [the main character] Maksim’s alienation and at only two moments rises above a generalized portrait of urban squalor. One is when Luopkha’s mother bribes a teacher with a swimming-pool pass; the other is when Maksim’s gran urges the boy to buy some cheap beef reduced in price for Election Day. Suddenly you get a glimpse of the endemic corruption that has survived the collapse of the Soviet system.”<sup>9</sup>

*The Independent’s* Paul Taylor was more taken with what he saw as Sigarev’s “bracingly clear-eyed tragicomic vision of a world where a woman would think of the local elections principally as the opportunity to grab some of the cut-prime meat the politicians offer as bribes.” “Sigarev,” he continues, “sees the chaos of contemporary Russia steadily, and he sees it whole. He’s an exciting talent and I look forward keenly to encountering more of his work.”<sup>10</sup> Other critics agreed. *The Evening Standard* named Sigarev the “Most Promising

Playwright of 2002.”<sup>11</sup> In presenting the award to Sigarev, Tom Stoppard voiced his opinion that “if Dostoevsky were writing in the 21st century, no doubt he would have written *Plasticine*.”<sup>12</sup> Billington, Taylor, and dozens of other critics would have plenty of opportunity to write about *Plasticine* in the years ahead because the play—together with other Sigarev works—would be performed regularly on stages around the world.

Russia’s New Drama Movement grew out of many roots from across the enormous length of the newly formed Russian Federation. Sigarev’s Yekaterinburg proved to be one particularly powerful environment for nurturing and disseminating new cultural forms that reflected the disorientation of a society in crisis. But the city’s status as a hub of creativity looks much more plausible in retrospect than it did at the time. For all too many observers, Yekaterinburg seemed destined for a postindustrial historical dustbin already filled by the likes of Manchester and Detroit.

## THE GATEWAY TO RUSSIAN ASIA

Yekaterinburg, which would become Russia’s fourth-largest city, was established late in the reign of Peter I (“The Great”) in 1723 just on the Asian side of the Urals Mountains somewhat more than 900 miles east of Moscow. The city was named after Saint Catherine to honor Tsar Peter’s wife, Ekaterina. It drew settlers from across the Russian Empire, slowly growing to achieve the status of a town only in 1796.<sup>13</sup> It eventually emerged as a major mining and manufacturing center prospering from the exploitation of the rich mineral deposits throughout the Urals region, enriching great industrial dynasties in the process.<sup>14</sup> The arrival of the Trans-Siberian Railroad in the late nineteenth century further secured Yekaterinburg’s status as one of Russia’s most important industrial centers.<sup>15</sup>

The city, in fact, was unusual for Imperial Russia in that it was an industrial headquarters

rather than an administrative center (Perm served as the provincial capital for much of the period).<sup>16</sup> It attracted a diverse population of workers and specialists—including a significant Jewish population at a time when the empire’s Jews were largely prohibited from moving beyond the Pale of Settlement in the lands annexed following the final partition of Poland in the late eighteenth century.<sup>17</sup>

Local mine and factory owners were less concerned with the details of such imperial policies than they were with using engineering knowledge to make their businesses profitable. As the political analyst Leon Aron has noted, the city’s “industrialists and merchants became well known for their wealth, curiosity and civic-mindedness. They were indefatigable travelers, collectors of nature’s curiosities and connoisseurs of the arts. They founded museums, theatres, and libraries.”<sup>18</sup> Consequently, they employed people who could do the job no matter how much they were discriminated against elsewhere. Jews, following the extension of the draft to non-Orthodox Christians in 1827, and others came to the region to serve their twenty-five-year compulsory military service and frequently never returned home.<sup>19</sup> Many political exiles and released prisoners similarly sought out the region’s cities after having served their Siberian sentences. The city was a place where smart outsiders could thrive. Even today, local residents often claim that they judge someone only by how hard he or she works.

Yekaterinburg became the sort of melting pot of empire that promotes unrefined interethnic, interconfessional, interprofessional, and interclass propinquity. On the one hand, numerous arrivals to the Urals region maintained their religious institutions and schools. According to the 1897 census, for example, between 85 and 97 percent of Jews in the four Urals provinces (*guberniia*) spoke Yiddish at home. On the other hand, residents from various backgrounds wore Russian clothes and worked alongside people



different from themselves in jobs ranging from the most menial to the professions.<sup>20</sup>

This pattern was true for many religious and national groups, promoting a sort of rough-and-ready tolerance and mixing of cultures. As a result, some of the worst pathologies of Russian imperial ethnic relations largely bypassed the city and region. For example, the only pogroms to take place in the city before 1917 were those provoked by police agents of the Ministry of Internal Affairs on orders from their Saint Petersburg superiors in October 1905. Attacks throughout the entire Urals region remained remarkably tame by Russian standards; only four Jews were killed in Ufa, and one Jew and one Russian perished in Yekaterinburg at the time. Only slightly higher death tolls occurred in Vyatka and Chelyabinsk.<sup>21</sup> Without question, local Black Hundreds, Bundist socialists, revolutionary socialists, Zionists, and Islamic Revivalists were all active in the years leading up to the outbreak of World War I; yet they never gained the traction of their brethren in other regions around the empire.<sup>22</sup>

Many factors promoted a frontier-like sensibility of live and let live, among them being the fact that Yekaterinburg was not as large as it was economically important. People, no matter how different, were never complete strangers to one another. Moreover, its intellectual achievements—though often considerable—were of a practical rather than ideological bent. Saint Petersburg, by contrast, has arguably spawned or imported every major Russian ideological movement for the past three hundred years, from Peter the Great's imperial absolutist modernization idea to today's postmodernist hyperrealism. In Yekaterinburg, the best and brightest throughout the Urals region focused their attention on how to get things done.<sup>23</sup> Intellectual, ideological, political, artistic, and even architectural fashions arrived with some delay from the cosmopolitan artistic centers of European Russia; and when they arrived, they

often became more grounded in the realities of everyday life.<sup>24</sup>

Yekaterinburg nonetheless was constantly at the center of many events that shaped Russia's destiny. The city was the focal point of intense fighting during the Russian Civil War, and the basement of one of the city's merchant houses—Ipatiev House—became the scene of the bloody execution of Russia's royal family—Tsar Nicholas, his wife Alexandra, his four daughters, and his son and trusted aides—on July 17, 1918.<sup>25</sup> A half-dozen years later, in 1924, the city was renamed for Yakov Sverdlov, the Bolshevik who gave the final order for their execution.<sup>26</sup> This moniker would remain until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (while the surrounding region has retained the Sverdlovsk name).

Stalin's "Great Leap Forward," beginning with the inauguration of the First Five-Year Plan in 1928, stimulated further growth as the city became home to numerous heavy industrial plants, including the largest machinery plant in a "European economy," the giant Uralmash works.<sup>27</sup> The city exploded with tens of thousands of new residents streaming in to fill the factories that were springing up all around.<sup>28</sup> Uralmash, which opened on July 15, 1933, was not just a factory. The project included a gigantic new "socialist city" (*sotsgorod*) for more than 100,000 workers and their families that had been built according to the principles of "dis-urbanization," which called for massive decentralized housing—with commercial blocks covering between 6 and 10 hectares on which housing surrounded by tree-lined allées opened onto green areas with sports, education, and cultural facilities carefully spaced and mixed together with stores and worker kitchens (*fabrika-kukhnia*).<sup>29</sup>

In many ways, the new industrial city became Sverdlovsk, while the historical center evolved into an appendage (one that would eventually be connected to it by a single subway line that opened in the 1990s). The distinction between the older and newer cities

underscored a central cleavage within Soviet society between the industrial proletariat and the urban intelligentsia. For the latter, the Uralmash neighborhood and its residents were only “semicivilized.”

The new “socialist city” that grew up around Uralmash is but part of the story of the city’s Stalinist reinvention.<sup>30</sup> The entire town was being rebuilt, as German, Polish, and Moscow architects representing the latest avant-garde styles designed one of the most impressive inventories of modernist Constructivist and Bauhausian buildings to be found anywhere.<sup>31</sup> Major cultural institutions sprang up. Although the local opera house had opened in 1912 and featured opera and ballet companies dating back many decades before, the city’s musical comedy theatre was founded in 1932; its puppet theatre, also in 1932; the local conservatory, in 1934; various literary museums, throughout the 1920s and 1930s; and a renowned folk chorus, in 1943.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, the city’s growth as a vibrant cultural center paralleled its rise as an industrial giant. Beyond performing, such institutions encouraged local youth to embrace cultural pursuits through their connections to the city’s and region’s vast factories and industrial enterprises that had grown up at the same time.<sup>33</sup>

Sverdlovsk escaped German occupation during World War II, becoming a major evacuation destination for important factories, educational, and cultural institutions from cities further west, including Moscow and Leningrad. Today’s modern and efficient international airport at Kol’tsovo initially served as a landing strip for Lend Lease flights from the United States beginning in December 1943.<sup>34</sup> All sorts of other facilities—together with their specialists—remained after the war to create a powerful urban center dominating a vast region astride the Soviet Union’s geographic center.<sup>35</sup> They were joined by exiled notables—including the World War II hero Marshal Konstantin Zhukov—together

with engineers and mathematicians, artists and lawyers, writers and musicians who had fallen prey to Stalin’s last purges against Jewish “cosmopolitans” and other undesirables.<sup>36</sup> Several of contemporary Yekaterinburg’s cultural luminaries—such as the popular poet-playwright-actor Vladimir Balashov—trace their familial connections to the city to this era.<sup>37</sup> Others—such as the local literary lion Valentin Lukyanin—arrived somewhat later to study and work in local industry.<sup>38</sup>

The postwar city had grown to become home to slightly more than a million people. Cold War Sverdlovsk was a focal point for Soviet military industrial production, which drew on both the city’s many factories together with numerous research facilities. Uralmash alone produced the famous T-34 tank and its Cold War successors, together with critical aviation and rocketry components as well as the giant heavy machinery that propelled the Soviet industrial machine for decades.

## DYNAMISM AND STAGNATION

The consequences of such a concentration of military-industrial-research capacity in the city proved to be both positive and negative. In 1979, a local research site specializing in biological warfare accidentally released anthrax into the atmosphere, leading to one of the worst biological contaminations of a civilian population in history.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, Soviet-era Sverdlovsk’s important role in defense research and development as well as industrial production prompted the authorities to limit access to the city, banning foreigners and unapproved Soviet citizens from crossing its boundaries.

On a more positive note, the city’s overall significance for the Soviet defense effort amplified the region’s political status and power.<sup>40</sup> Local political leaders developed their own distinctive style with roots in the region’s past. As Yeltsin’s biographer, Leon Aron, writes, “Yekaterinburg’s unique history,

demography, and industry contributed to the emergence of what might be called the Ural school of Communist Party leadership. As a rule, the Ural Party bosses were competent, tough, independent, strong, seemingly incorruptible, even austere, and direct.”<sup>41</sup>

By the mid-1980s, incoming Communist Party general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev raided the local elite for effective administrators. He brought Sverdlovsk Communist Party regional first secretary Yeltsin to Moscow to tear apart the capital’s entrenched local party elite. Gorbachev similarly summoned Uralmash director Nikolai Ryzhkov to the Kremlin, where he became the general secretary’s longest-serving prime minister (holding the office from 1985 until 1991).<sup>42</sup>

As home to the sorts of pragmatic intellectuals needed to produce giant machinery and weapons of mass destruction, the city likewise generated a vibrant theatrical and musical life, which remained innovative during the years that became known as the “Brezhnev Era of Stagnation [*Zastoi*].” Because it was closed to the outside world, and therefore out of the Soviet mainstream, the local scene enjoyed many more degrees of freedom of expression than larger, more open cities closer to the Soviet heartland.<sup>43</sup> This vitality was especially visible in popular music.

Brezhnev-era Sverdlovsk emerged as one of the Soviet Union’s most creative centers for rock ‘n’ roll music, rivaled only by Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg). Its distinctive “Urals Rock” movement—led by such bands as Urfin Dzhyus, Chaif, Nautilus Pompilius, Nastya, Trek, Agata Kristi, and Smyslovye Galliustinatsii—transformed late Soviet and postindependence Russian popular music.

Beyond rock, nonconformist artists such as Evgeny Malakhin, known as “Bukashkin” (a small insect), sustained a vibrant underground art scene that was known as far away as Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Odessa. The city’s homegrown literary journal, *Ural’skii sledopyt* (*Ural Pathfinder*), established itself as the Soviet

Union’s leading outlet without peer for science fiction. And the region’s more traditional, “thick” literary journal, *Ural*, remained one of the leading outlets for creative writing outside the political and cultural capitals of Moscow and Leningrad.

Given the Soviet policy of establishing a full range of cultural and educational institutions in cities with more than 1 million residents, Yekaterinburg simultaneously offered a complete range of official theatres, covering all major genres of dance, opera, philharmonic and choral and chamber music, drama, musical comedy and operetta, children’s theatre, and the circus arts. These institutions were supported by the local Communist Party leadership, though not without interference and controversy.<sup>44</sup> These official state-supported cultural institutions steadfastly sustained high-quality ballet, opera, musical comedy, modern dance, puppet, and dramatic theatre companies.

But the city’s dynamism could also take other, less savory forms. Multigenerational criminal gangs, which would win the city the dubious title of post-Soviet Russia’s “crime capital” during the 1990s, in fact were created and thrived during the Brezhnev era. The same advantages of geography that allowed the city to link east and west also attracted criminal groups, which easily penetrated a tough local working-class culture while attracting into their bands former convicts released from camps to the east.<sup>45</sup>

## THE “SECOND FRONT”

A distinctive Soviet youth culture at odds with official ideology began to emerge during the late 1950s as the harshest elements of the Stalinist police state began to recede following the Great Leader’s death in 1953.<sup>46</sup> Hip “*stilyagi*” began to appear in Moscow and Leningrad as well as in cities in western Ukraine and the Baltic republics that had not been incorporated into the Soviet Union until the 1939 Stalin-

Ribbentrop Pact just before World War II.<sup>47</sup> The term “*stilyagi*,” for funky Soviet-style hipster *fashionistas*, derived from the fact that these “beatniks” wore “stylish” clothes beyond generally accepted attire.<sup>48</sup> Jazz dominated, though the early sounds of rock ‘n’ roll had reached the USSR by the time a massive youth festival brought nearly 35,000 international youth to Moscow during the summer of 1957.<sup>49</sup>

The first Soviet rock ‘n’ roll bands began to appear in Estonia and Latvia—and eventually in Moscow and Leningrad—during the early 1960s. The new music took off by mid-decade with the arrival of the Beatles over shortwave radios and, eventually, contraband cassette tape recordings.<sup>50</sup> As the Soviet rock critic and historian Artemy Troitsky later observed, “The Beatles’ happy, harmonious vocal choir proved to be just the voice for which our confused generation was waiting, but was unable to create for itself.”<sup>51</sup> By the 1970s, Soviet rock bands had found their own worldview. The genre swept the country, with homegrown groups such as Mashina Vremeni (Time Machine), Akvarium (Aquarium), and Zvuki Mu (The Sounds of Mu) grabbing large followings. Their popularity forced the Communist Party and state bureaucrats lording over official culture to sponsor their own tamer equivalents and to elevate politically neutral disco to the level of a cultural icon.<sup>52</sup>

The quasi-underground Soviet rock scene thrived in the dark shadows of official institutions such as those attached to Sverdlovsk’s massive factories: in restaurants and workers’ clubs, in palaces of culture, and on festival stages often controlled by Young Communist League (Komsomol), trade union, and factory officials. Indeed, rock music and video salons became a meaningful source of income for such official institutions as well as for their officers.<sup>53</sup> Some speculate that these revenues became the basis for the primitive accumulation of capital during the Gorbachev years, eventually enabling such officials to move into the privatization of metals, coal, gas, and oil once the Soviet Union collapsed.<sup>54</sup>

Ever more portable recording technologies allowed musicians to spread their sound across the entire Soviet Union so that, by the 1980s, a robust, complex, and varied rock music culture had taken root, ranging from ubiquitous disco groups to punk and everything in between.<sup>55</sup> Soviet rock easily survived a round of repression unleashed in 1984 by disgruntled cultural overlords who had taken advantage of the rapid turnover of Communist Party general secretaries following Brezhnev’s late death in 1982.<sup>56</sup>

In some ways, the Soviet rock scene’s apotheosis occurred with an internationally televised charity concert staged to assist the victims of the 1986 Chernobyl’ nuclear accident.<sup>57</sup> This landmark event nonetheless highlighted some of the limits of rock’s reach in Soviet society because its top headliner—Alla Pugacheva—represented a much more popular style. Pugacheva became the Soviet Union’s and the Russian-speaking world’s most enduring and most popular performer. Her music blends elements of rock with strains of the era’s most beloved musical genre, a bouncy yet nostalgic and sentimental blend known in Russian as *estrada*, or “variety show” songs.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, underground poet bards such as Alexander Galich, Bulat Okudzhava, and Vladimir Vysotsky gave more fulsome voice to the era’s discontent through their gravelly storytelling ballads about workers, prisoners, soldiers, drivers, alcoholics, and the intelligentsia generally and the artistic intelligentsia in particular, as well as others among the Soviet alienated and dispossessed. Their songs were quickly passed from hand to hand on low-quality cassettes and tape recordings.<sup>59</sup>

But it was rock, as Richard Stites argues, that became “the driving force behind youth culture in large Soviet cities.”<sup>60</sup> This was especially true in closed cities such as Yekaterinburg. Writing about the similarly closed industrial city Dnepropetrovsk in Ukraine, Sergei Zhuk notes that rock became a way of creating a new youth identity

through a “process of selective borrowing and appropriation, translation, and incorporation into the indigenous cultural context.”<sup>61</sup> According to Zhuk, music and other Western cultural products tore through closed societies such as the Soviet Union in general, and large defense industry cities such as Dnepropetrovsk and Yekaterinburg in particular. The music “contributed to the spread of cynicism among young people. The oppressive ideological atmosphere of Dnepropetrovsk as a closed city contributed not only to ideological and cultural confusion but also to the moral issue of ideological cynicism.”<sup>62</sup>

Yekaterinburg’s rock scene, though part of these larger Soviet trends, remained distinctive in some important ways. By the early 1980s, a number of talented and creative bands had emerged in the city, which combined a pop sound with sharp critiques of social problems. Vyacheslav Butusov’s Nautilus Pampilius in the 1980s and the Samoilov brothers’ Agata Kristi in the 1990s brought together the gloomy longings of a “lost generation” with songs of love and social protest. The group Chaif (from the local slang word for “pleasure,” derived from the Russian word for tea)—perhaps the longest-running group dating back to the 1980s and continuing on stage for a third of a century and more—proudly declared its connection to its native city both in song and in charitable activities.

These bands—and others like them—were the creations of the “technical intelligentsia” that so dominated the city. Some band members were trained architects; others were conservatory graduates. Yulia Chicherina, a descendent of Lenin’s and Stalin’s commissar of foreign affairs, Georgii Chicherin, spent her childhood years as a serious music student. Their bands and their songs combined philosophical thought, social criticism, musical sophistication and a drive for a rollicking good time that distinguished the “Urals Rock” sound from other Russian rock styles. Collectively, their music reflected the preoccupation of an urban

culture and intellectual sensibility that seeks to integrate a sharp critical perspective while not shying away from the ugly realities of life. They help to define their city’s special sense of self, which the local writer Valentin Lukyanov has identified as its distinctive “soul.”<sup>63</sup>

## THE “PROVINCIAL” WRITTEN WORD

Struggling to gain control over an entrenched Communist Party elite, the rising leader Nikita Khrushchev undertook the first of what would become an unending three-and-a-half-decade stream of failed reforms to make the Soviet economy more efficient while breaking the stranglehold of the party’s elite (*nomenklatura*) over the country. In January 1957, Khrushchev announced that he would reorganize the country’s economic system by separating agricultural and industrial bureaucracies into parallel sets of regional economic councils (*sovmarkhozy*), which simultaneously would merge several political regions into larger transregional units. Despite subsequent refinements, the new system created more chaos than efficiency, helping to lead to the October 1964 internal Communist Party coup that removed Khrushchev from office.<sup>64</sup> As one of the designated *sovmarkhoz* seats, Yekaterinburg was poised to receive a recognition normally reserved for the capitals of various union republics (e.g., Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan). Literary journals were among the accoutrements of status.

The preponderance of literary publications in the Russian Federation (R.S.F.S.R.) had been based in Moscow and Leningrad, with new regional journals being launched in Vladivostok at the end of the war, and in Arkhangelsk to the far north in 1965.<sup>65</sup> As a result, “provincial” writers had little opportunity to publish their works independently from the official overlords in Moscow. Some regional journals from the early Soviet era—such as Sverdlovsk’s *Sturn* and Ural’skii *sledopyt*—held on until Stalin centralized cultural institutions during the mid-1930s. A number of annual

literary almanacs—such as Sverdlovsk’s *Ural’skii sovremennik*, which would continue to be published for thirty-seven years—sprang up around the country to fill the gap. But none of these publications attained the reverence preserved in Russian literary circles for the sacred “thick” journal, which, since the late nineteenth century, has been the preferred outlet for Russian creative writing.<sup>66</sup>

Moscow’s and Leningrad’s prestigious “thick” journals—such as *Novyi Mir*, *Znayia*, and *Druzhiba narodov*—led the literary explosion of once-banned works that would become known as “the Thaw.” Seeing an opportune moment, Sverdlovsk’s and its region’s writers moved quickly to replicate the success of the central journals at a regional level, using the city’s new status as a *sovmarkhoz* center to leverage support from regional party and state authorities.

Vadim Ocheretin and other writers relaunched *Ural’skii Sledopyt*, a journal that had managed to run for nine issues in 1935 before succumbing to Communist Party censorship.<sup>67</sup> Ocheretin and his successor Soviet-era editors—Vladimir Shustov, Ivan Akulov, and the two-decade-serving Stanislav Meshavkin—firmly established the journal as the premiere outlet for science fiction writing in the Soviet Union, gaining international recognition for their efforts. By publishing homegrown Soviet authors as well as translations of international writers, *Ural’skii Sledopyt* developed a cult following that reached far beyond the Urals region. The journal’s Aelita Festival became the Soviet Union’s premiere event showcasing science fiction, bringing the genre’s most talented writers to Yekaterinburg each year.<sup>68</sup> They simultaneously used the journal as a platform to promote a discussion of environmental concerns both within the region and nationally throughout the Soviet Union while focusing on regional literary history from time to time.<sup>69</sup>

The Regional Communist Party Committee (Obkom) designated Ocheretin

as the editor of a second, broad-based literary “thick” journal, *Ural*, which was intended to showcase regional writers and themes. Given that it was managed by the local division of the official Writers’ Union and overseen by party officials, *Ural* focused on promoting a regional identity among local writers.<sup>70</sup> After a number of political interventions by the party, including reprimands and dismissals of early editors, the journal firmly secured its stature as a leading regional literary journal when Valentin Lukyanin assumed the editorship in 1980.

Lukyanin set out to promote the works of young authors; expand its focus to include plays as well as short stories, novels, and poems; and reach out to a wider community through discussion clubs and other events.<sup>71</sup> He, too, would prompt political controversy.

In 1982, Lukyanin published Konstantin Lagunov’s novel *Bronzovyi dog* (*The Bronze Mastiff*) in the journal’s August, September, and October issues.<sup>72</sup> The novel included almost documentary reportage tied together by fictionalized narratives offering a “portrayal of the true face of the oil barons” of the West Siberian petroleum belt in the neighboring Tyumen Region. In his chronicle of shocking transgressions against “Communist morality,” many of Lagunov’s characterizations presaged the behavior of post-Soviet Russian oil oligarchs. Tyumen’ party and state officials immediately expressed their outrage with Regional Party First Secretary Georgii Bogomyakov probably telephoning his Sverdlovsk counterpart Boris Yeltsin about the matter. Meanwhile, the journal’s readership skyrocketed, and letters of support started pouring in from around the country.

The Lagunov Affair had hardly simmered down when Lukyanin proposed publishing Nikokai Nikonov’s story (*povest’*) “Starikova gora” (“The Old Man’s Mountain”) in the journal’s January 1983 issue. Set in the fictional village of Makarovka, Nikonov’s tale exposed the social pathologies and degradations of Soviet

rural life a half century after collectivization, ending with the line “The land was waiting for its owner.”<sup>73</sup> Given the brutality of collectivization in the region—the infamously legendary *pioner* (scout) Pavlik Morozov, who condemned his father by denouncing him to authorities, lived in the region’s Gerasimovka village—Nikonov was poking at an even rawer nerve than Lagunov had.

Uncertain censors turned the galley proofs of the January 1983 *Ural* issue over to the Regional Party Committee, which deleted approximately one-sixth of the text. Once published, *Ural* became the object of an array of attacks by the Communist Party and KGB. Eventually, in May 1983, Lukyanin was summoned to a meeting of the committee’s Executive Bureau, where he was excoriated by First Secretary Yeltsin and other members of his team for four and a half hours. After a public admission of serious shortcomings, Lukyanin held onto his editorial position, while Lagunov and Nikonov avoided official sanctions. Copies of the January 1983 issue of *Ural* remained hidden away in most regional libraries despite a Communist Party order that they be destroyed.

Despite—or, perhaps, because of—these political interventions, *Ural* exerted a primal force of gravity around which regional literary life could grow and flourish. It published articles focusing on local and regional history as well as traditions, cultural life, and peculiarities, thus giving definition to a distinctive regional identity. Its offices and events came to play the role of the legendary renegade hangouts Gavan and Café Saigon in Leningrad, while never turning its back on more traditional writers and cultural figures.<sup>74</sup> Its very existence provided an outlet for regional authors of competing styles and temperaments from across Siberia, both young and old.<sup>75</sup>

Lukyanin’s catholic embrace of a regional literary vision proved to be especially important for promoting local writers during the height of the Brezhnev era, when Moscow-

based journals and publishing houses were held captive by increasingly ossified cliques in the capital.<sup>76</sup> Consequently, as with rock music, nonconformist artists, local novelists, short story writers, poets, literary and theatrical critics, and playwrights maintained a distinctive voice. These efforts gained the additional outside support of many prominent writers from throughout the Urals and beyond, such as Lev Davydychev from Perm, Evgenii Ananyev from Tiumen’, and Viktor Astafyev from Krasnoyarsk.<sup>77</sup>

*Ural* became such a beloved institution that, in the late 1990s when its existence was in question due to the various economic and other uncertainties of post-Soviet life, prominent local authors stepped in to breathe new life into the journal. The internationally renowned Yekaterinburg playwright and dramatist Nikolai Kolyada took over the journal’s editorial offices in July 1999 at a time when its official subscription numbers had dropped to a mere three hundred, and when there were no more manuscripts in the queue to be published. He parlayed his connections to attract new writers, linking the journal to theatre festivals and generally making *Ural* essential reading for anyone interested in the “New Russian Writing” movement. A decade later, he passed the journal along to the worthy hands of his protégé, the internationally renowned local playwright Oleg Bogaev, who is expanding the journal’s readership on the Internet.<sup>78</sup>

## UNCONTROLLED CARTELS

Both *Ural’skii sledopyt* and *Ural* served as important resources for the local theatre community as Yekaterinburg moved into the post-Soviet world. Like the various theatre companies and venues that took shape during the middle years of the twentieth century, these journals and the networks nurtured by them provided a powerful base on which new forms of drama could take shape.

Brezhnev-era Sverdlovsk was home to more than posses of writers. As mentioned above, the city held a reputation as one of the most criminally violent in the entire Soviet Union.<sup>79</sup> The same factors that enriched its economic and cultural life also made it a natural center for vice.<sup>80</sup> The city was sufficiently far from Moscow to be beyond direct control yet close enough to remain within reach and close enough to the Siberian prisons to become a magnet for newly released prisoners. It stood astride major transportation routes connecting narcotics-growing fields to the south and east and drug markets to the west, with a vast population of factory workers and their families who were beginning to feel the first indications of a national economic collapse that would shut down their factories. Everything about the city promoted the emergence of vast, disciplined, aggressive, and malevolent bands of armed criminals, hangers-on, and wannabes.<sup>80</sup>

Criminal cartels—known in Russia as “*mafiyas*”—quickly moved in as the Soviet industrial economy collapsed to lay claim to the vast mineral wealth of the region; to seize and dismantle the vast factories that could only be used as scrap; to sell off light and heavy weaponry from military bases that were no longer under any form of discernible control; to traffic in desperate human beings trying to find some way to survive; to push drugs, and to launder their profits; and to extort more. The larger “*mafiyas*”—such as Tsentral’nye (which grew up around the Central Market), the Afgantsy (made up of Afghan war veterans), the Siniye (a gang of former prisoners), and the Azerbaizhantsy (consisting of criminals from the former Soviet republic)—branched out into many areas. Other gangs, which were often rooted in specific enterprises—such as the powerful and massive Uralmash gang, and the less potent Miko-Invest and Sakirtan cartels—tended to specialize in their operations.

The transition taking place in the criminal world paralleled the larger transformations in the Soviet and post-Soviet economy. The

Centrals (Tsentral’nye) dominated the city during the late Soviet period as they exerted control over an energetic black market trade in goods and services that initially was based at the central market and spread out from there. With the decline of the Uralmash plant, a group of former professional sportsmen, their friends, and relatives from the neighborhoods surrounding the factory began to seize the assets of the once-gigantic plant. Their gang, which coalesced by 1991, entered into turf battles with the older Centrals, unleashing a brutal and massive gang war between the two groups following the June 16, 1991, assassination of the Uralmash boss Grigorii Tsyganov. Explosions, shootings, and murders became a daily occurrence from 1992 until 1994, with Yekaterinburg becoming known as the most criminal city in Russia.<sup>85</sup>

The Uralmash gang clearly emerged as victorious by late 1994, forcing the Centrals out of much of their original territory. Uralmash operatives allegedly expanded their horizons, reputedly laying claim to various local, regional, and national political positions. Having become increasingly secure, Uralmash began to go “legit,” reportedly taking over legal real estate, hotels, industrial, financial, and construction businesses in Russia and abroad in Europe and the United States.<sup>86</sup>

Gang control of the native city hardly disappeared even as tactics evolved from less to more licit activities. By the late 1990s, an estimated 60 percent of all enterprises in Yekaterinburg were controlled by criminal organizations, while between 70 and 80 percent of private and privatized firms and commercial banks were said to pay protection money to criminal groups, corrupt officials, and racketeers.<sup>87</sup>

More generally numerous successful gangs expanded their drug, arms, and nuclear materials trading worldwide through outposts in Cyprus, India, the United States, Poland, Germany, and China.<sup>88</sup> Many still busied themselves by victimizing local residents. A



quarter of all city residents claimed themselves to have been victims of crime in November 1997.<sup>89</sup> The mayhem would come under official control slowly during the late 1990s and early 2000s as local, regional, and national political leaders persistently began to impose coherence on the Russian state.

The Uralmash band in particular had become well situated to avoid a direct confrontation with a more centralized Russian state by the time Vladimir Putin became Russian president, in large measure because it had already left its more overtly criminal activities behind. But the underlying network of criminal power undoubtedly remained in place.<sup>90</sup>

Foot soldiers were easily recruited in a city where tens of thousands of young factory workers could not find a job. *Mafiya* bands—some associated with the Centrals, others with Uralmash, and others not, including at least seventy-six organized and countless more unorganized groups—fought over turf, leading to an outburst of especially widespread urban violence, death, and havoc that surpassed that found even in out-of-control Moscow and Saint Petersburg.<sup>91</sup> As younger and younger gang members fell in the onslaught, a local culture grew up promoting opulent funeral services in which the deceased gangsters were laid to rest under ever more ornate tombstones.<sup>92</sup> Two competing cemeteries on opposite sides of town filled with the extravagant graves of criminals who had been rubbed out by other criminals. The 1994 tombstone of Central boss Mikhail Kuchin, for example, is a ten-foot-high malachite monument encrusted with precious stones with Kuchin's carved visage holding the keys to his beloved Mercedes and wearing a designer suit over an unbuttoned shirt displaying an Orthodox Christian cross.<sup>93</sup>

At least one local gangster, Evgenii Monakh, turned his attention to writing detective stories. The son of a well-placed family that included a teacher of philosophy in a Communist Party school, Monakh turned to a life of crime and,

in 1994, began to write about his experiences with vibrant, colorful verve. Two years later, he was dead, the victim of the sort of story he himself celebrated as an author.<sup>94</sup> His last story, "Smiling before Death," appeared in a special double issue of *Ural*, bringing local literary and criminal life full circle.<sup>95</sup>

A world in spectacular meltdown places all sorts of human vice on prominent display and forces survivors to find meaning wherever they can. Where is human dignity to be found in a world so full of violence and degradation? Does it matter? Are there limits to unbridled cynicism? What does it mean to be human? How can one show the human being at his or her absolute most perverse and still find honor? Such themes, not surprisingly, came to dominate local literature and dramaturgy. They provided the fodder for the creative impulses that could be supported by the institutional foundations provided by journals and theatres enriched by a distinctive urban "soul" fervently being expressed in pop music and culture.

As was the case everywhere across Russia, local leaders in Yekaterinburg were left on their own to confront the terrible dislocations of post-Soviet deindustrialization. They tried with varying degrees of success to parlay connections with their former colleagues in Moscow to open the city and its economy to the world at large in order to sustain a city population hovering above one million souls.<sup>96</sup>

Two decades later, the city's continued vitality demonstrates the local leaders' general success. At a time when many Russian cities were losing population, Yekaterinburg slowly grew, in no small measure due to the arrival of migrants from neighboring Central Asian countries.<sup>97</sup> In 2009, census takers counted 1,332,264 residents in the city (just below third-ranked Novosibirsk, which had 1,397,191 residents; and just ahead of fifth-place Nizhny Novgorod, which was home to 1,272,527).<sup>98</sup>

Soviet-era cultural institutions, struggling to find their way in the new post-Soviet

environment, spun off a number of semilegitimate theatre companies and music clubs that gave voice to some of the most creative Russian playwrights and rock musicians of their generation. Yekaterinburg nurtured many of the voices who would define post-Soviet Russia. The leading local playwrights Vasily Sigarev, Oleg Bogayev, and the Presnyakov brothers wrote for the Volkhonka Chamber Theatre. Nikolai Kolyada created his own highly celebrated theatre, which performs his own works together with those of other contemporary and classical Russian and international authors. They enjoyed critical success and global acclaim in part because of their accomplishments at home, and in part because they helped to create something new that spanned Russia as a whole. Their success was only partially homegrown. It also was promoted by a national “New Russian Drama,” which would catapult local playwrights onto the stages of such global theatre centers as Moscow, London, and New York.

## THE NEW RUSSIAN DRAMA MOVEMENT

*Plasticine*'s London premiere was more than happenstance. Sigarev was but one of a score of young Russian playwrights identified with a drama movement that had been formed in response to funding opportunities provided by the British Council in cooperation with the Royal Court.

As Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky observe in *Performing Violence*, a study of the New Russian Drama, that innovation in theatre lags behind economic, social, and political upheavals by a decade or so.<sup>99</sup> Such a period represents the amount of time required for new voices to be heard, for established and fresh writers to assimilate society's profound transformations so that they can form and express a new point of view; and for more

established cultural figures to hear and come to terms with what is being said.

As Beumers and Lipovetsky argue, “Looking back at the history of the twentieth century the best plays were written not at the beginning of the 1920s but at the end of that decade and the early 1930s.... The best plays were written not at the peak of the [Khrushchev-era] Thaw or the early 1960s... but at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s.... In Europe, the heyday of intellectual theater occurs not during the vibrant 1920s, but in the depressive atmosphere of the 1930s, . . . and the emergence of the Theatre of the Absurd—probably the most important event in dramatic writing of the postwar—coincides not with the revolutionary 1960s, but the stagnant 1950s.”

“Perhaps drama,” they continue, “becomes the main field for literary experiments precisely when—after rough times, revolution, upheavals, and shifts—there comes a period of stabilization (stagnation, depression). This writing reacts to the hardening of a new sociality, previously nonformalized and open to change. When drama is on the rise, it almost always focuses on unfulfilled hopes and aspirations. It is interested in those people who pay for the social shift, who receive slaps in the face, who have been pushed somewhere into the gutter or abandoned there as history toppled: In the beginning they beckoned, when they were cast aside.”<sup>100</sup> By the late 1990s, Russia had no shortage of those who had been slapped in the face, pushed into the gutter, and abandoned by the history of the post-Soviet collapse; and no shortage of writers and artists trying to give form and meaning to their travails.

Theatre requires more than setting down ideas from a single mind with pen and paper (or keyboard and screen). Plays are social acts, requiring playwrights and actors and directors and sponsors, and stages, and audiences, and money. Early in the 1990s, many observers argued that Russian theatre was just one more victim of the post-Soviet transition.

Commercially unviable and bereft of fresh ideas, Russian theatre entered a period that to many was marked by death throes of excruciating pain.

But just as some were sounding the death knell for the Russian stage, the New Russian Drama Movement was coalescing around the nexus of a booming late-1990s economy that spun off dozens of new cultural venues in Moscow and beyond; talented writers and directors liberated by the end of censorship that accompanied the collapse of Communism; actors increasingly exposed to the rich tapestry of competing styles unencumbered by the legacy of the ossified psychological realism of the Soviet stage; and audiences trying to find their own life amid the wreckage of a post-Soviet culture overrun by the most degraded and least creative artifacts of an increasingly globalized pop culture.<sup>101</sup> The movement's dominant feature has been "its neo-naturalistic aesthetic, with unprecedented prominence given to representations of violence," whereas its "main thematic preoccupation is the deep crisis of identity that has characterized post-Soviet society."<sup>102</sup>

Each of these developments needed to come together at just the right moment to produce a genuinely innovative dramatic form. After all, the extraordinary theatre of the Gorbachev years in the late 1980s was followed in the early 1990s by the collapse of the theatre scene, particularly in Moscow, as increasingly impoverished audiences had little patience to sit through an evening of "filth" (*chernykha*). Psychological realism, which had become the only permissible Soviet theatrical style during the 1940s and 1950s, had been preceded and succeeded by periods rich with the grotesque, the symbolic, and the political.

The late 1990s, then, were years when a number of theatrical tendencies that fed into the New Russian Drama Movement aligned in unprecedented patterns. These events occurred simultaneously with the establishment in 1998 of the Playwright and Director Center

by the veteran Moscow playwrights Mikhail Roshchin and Alexei Kazantsev. Roshchin and Kazantsev's success prompted the creation of other new venues, such as *Theatr.doc*, the *Praktika Theatre*, and other influential performance spaces.

## **THE BRITISH ARE COMING! THE BRITISH ARE COMING!**

The New Russian Drama nonetheless required a defining event, when the various elements flowing into it could coalesce into an identifiable phenomenon. This moment came in July 1997 over the course of a six-day British Council-supported seminar led by a delegation from the Royal Court, which met at the ramshackle remains of Konstantin Stanislavsky's country estate at Liubimovka, near Moscow.<sup>103</sup>

Within months, the first Russian Festival of Documentary Theatre would open with support from the George Soros-supported Open Society Institute; theatre festivals and workshops would convene; and, in February 2002, Elena Gremina and Mikhail Ugarov would open the basement *Teatr.doc* on central Moscow's *Trekhprudnyi Pereulok*. Their success was followed in October 2005 by the opening of Eduard Boyakov's *Praktika Theatre* nearby, as well as the creation of countless similar companies around the country, such as Saint Petersburg's *Chelovek.doc Theatre*, Kemerovo's *Lozhe Theatr*, Chelyabinsk's *Baby Theatre*, and the subsequent *Kinoteatr.doc* cinema movement.<sup>104</sup>

As the then-British Council Moscow program officer Sasha Dugdale tells the story, "In 1998 when I was working at the British Council in Russia, I was introduced to Elena Gremina and Alexei Kazantsev, two playwrights who devoted themselves to supporting a culture of playwriting in Russia. Kazantsev and Gremina together with other playwrights and critics had set up Liubimovka in 1992—a retreat for playwrights and directors,

where young writers, chosen from the quality of their work, rehearsed readings of their plays with actors and directors. Liubimovka was named after Stanislavskii's estate, just outside Moscow, where the retreat took place. At the times when I attended a wild and shambolic event, a storm of creativity studded readings of the plays, which would become legendary in Russia's New Writing tradition, and after the reading a protracted and heartfelt discussion of the play would ensue."<sup>105</sup>

The British Council brought the Royal Court Theatre to Russia. Already having won the "Europe Theatre Prize," the Royal Court had been running workshops around the world, taking such leading British writers as Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, and Jez Butterworth along with them. They tried to encourage others to adapt the documentary theatre style known as "verbatim," whereby a text taken directly from the street would be spoken onstage.<sup>106</sup> The resulting theatre became associated with an aggressively shocking style of drama that had emerged in Britain during the 1960s, known as "In-Yer-Face" theatre. Moving to the mainstream of British theatre by the 1990s, "In-Yer-Face" theatre shocks audiences by the extremism of its language and images, unsettles them by its emotional frankness and disturbs them by its acute questioning of moral norms."<sup>107</sup>

Although the Royal Court had experienced only sporadic success in proselytizing verbatim documentary theatre—primarily in the Balkans and Poland—Russia immediately proved to be exceptionally fertile soil for such theatrical aggression.<sup>108</sup> Both nineteenth-century revolutionaries and later Soviet cultural bureaucrats promoted sending writers out to the countryside, to factories, and to provincial cities as a way of connecting the arts with the *Narod* (the People). The notion that writers and theatre troupes should interact with everyday life and not just amuse comfortable patrons has a distinguished history in Russia, one very consistent with the style of verbatim

documentary theatre being promoted by the Royal Court.<sup>109</sup>

Newcomers to the stage from fringe areas—such as Sigarev, Vladimir and Oleg Presnyakov from Yekaterinburg; Maxim Kurochkin and Natalia Vorozhbit from Kyiv; Yury Klavdiev, and Vyacheslav and Mikhail Durnenkov from Togliatti; Evgenii Grishkovets from Kemerovo; Yaroslava Pulinovich from Omsk, Ivan Vyrypaev from Irkutsk, together with the already established incomparable Olga Mukhina, who had grown up in the Far North—found a coherent new voice to express the traumas and pathologies of their daily lives during the post-Soviet collapse.<sup>110</sup> Though it had never been characterized by overtly political documentary theatre, the New Russian Drama Movement nonetheless provided a means for discussing the country's cascading traumas, such as the war in Chechnya and the bountiful injustices of a corrupt judicial system.<sup>111</sup>

Within a matter of months, documentary theatre swept across Russian stages. The British Council's support led directly to the translation of plays into English, and their production at the Royal Court. The Royal Shakespeare Company similarly commissioned and performed a number of new works by young Russian playwrights.<sup>112</sup> Just as important, the Liubimovka workshops connected the new writers to Moscow's mainstream theatres, leading to production of New Russian Drama Movement scripts at such venues as Svetlana Vragova's Theatre on Spartakovskaya Square, Oleg Tabakov's Studio Theatre, Anatolii Vasiliev's School of Dramatic Art, Sergei Artsybashev's Theatre on Pokrovka, Mikhail Shepenko's Chamber Theatre, Petr Fomenko's Workshop Theatre, Mark Rozovskii's Theatre at Nikitskii Gates, and Sergei Zhenovach's Theatre Art Studio in converted factories near Taganka Square once owned by the Stanislavskii and Alekseev families.<sup>113</sup> Plays by authors associated with the New Russian

Drama Movement soon were being performed on stages around the world.

### HOW “RUSSIAN” CAN A PLAY AT THE ROYAL COURT BE?

Unsurprisingly, the New Russian Drama was not to everyone’s taste. Nationalists complained about its association with Britain, especially at a time when NATO planes were bombing fellow Slavs in Serbia; others simply deplored the playwrights’ fascination with sex, violence, depravity, and general *chernukha* (filth).<sup>114</sup> Yet the New Russian Drama was never merely derivative of British verbatim documentary and In-Yer-Face theatre.

First, audiences in search of Russian-language cultural expression had begun to flock to theatres at the initial signs of the post-Soviet economic recovery the decade before. This new theatre emerged from an increasingly vibrant Russian scene, which had spawned dozens of studio theatres, scores of theatre festivals, and hundreds of innovative works by more established companies. Talented playwrights such as Liudmila Petrushevskaya, Alexei Kazantsev, Eduard Radzinsky, and Vladimir Sorokin had begun to transform Russian theatre before the Soviet Union had come to an end; and Olga Mukhina’s landmark plays *Tanya Tanya* and *You* had appeared well before visitors from the Royal Court arrived at Liubimovka.<sup>115</sup>

Second, Russian verbatim documentary theatre is never quite verbatim. Russian authors simulate verisimilitude, characters, and circumstances rather than merely lifting them straight from life and placing them on stage. In contrast to their British counterparts, Russian writers are much more likely to juxtapose languages and events and texts from a number of different sources and to meld them into something new and distinctly their own.<sup>116</sup>

Third, and perhaps most important, many of the authors and plays categorized as constituting the New Russian Drama Movement seek to

reveal more than the pathologies of their own society. Their characters retain a core human dignity in the face of the most degrading circumstances. Plays are infused by a larger spirituality, in mocking contrast to the events taking place on stage.

At the close of the Togliatti playwright Yury Klavdiev’s powerful 2006 play *The Polar Truth*, about the ugly underside of Russian life, the HIV-positive character “Kid” proclaims in the closing monologue: “The truth? That’s what we are. Those of us who live. Who work. Who earn wages. It’s people who don’t beg for anything from anyone—gimme money, gimme trust, gimme an office, gimme taxes, gimme soldiers, gimme, gimme, gimme and I’ll just go and do as I please. People like that don’t know anything about life—look at all the sciences they went out and invented. Organizations. Administrations. Welfare offices. All that to explain to us why we still keep living so stupidly. But we don’t live stupidly. We just live.”<sup>117</sup>

This underlying attitude of profound humanity beneath the surface horror of post-Soviet life attracted audiences back to theatres in ways in which the earlier era of aggressive and frank theatre a decade before had simply driven people away. The new works proved to be about more than portraying society’s “filth.” *Chernukha* was coming to serve a larger end rather than just to shock; it was coming to create moments for redemption.

In Klavdiev’s *Martial Arts*, to cite another example, a ten-year-old boy and girl are saved from the vengeance of elders, drugs dealers, addicts, thieves, thugs, and corrupt policemen by the magical Queen of Spades, who intervenes just as they are about to be killed by their tormentors.<sup>118</sup> Although the appearance of this traditional Russian folk heroine could have made a mockery of the entire tale (can only a miracle save us?), Klavdiev instead drew on the imagery to humanize and domesticate a situation of unbelievable horror.

Fourth, Russian directors—traditionally the dominant force in the national theatre tradition—have over time creatively interpreted the texts of the play. As a result, performances have moved further and further away over the course of the past decade or so from the documentary stance encouraged by the Royal Court’s missionaries.<sup>119</sup>

The New Russian Drama Movement was, without question, “new.” Many of its authors consciously sought to abandon long-standing cultural references from past Russian and Soviet traditions as a means for embracing a contemporary Russian reality that is distinct from what preceded it.<sup>121</sup> Yet they could not escape the powerful force of a great theatrical tradition. References to Chekhov, for example, abound in the work of many movement playwrights. Moreover, in Nikolai Kolyada’s 2011 play *Baba Shanel’* (*The Old Gal Chanel*), one of the members of the Ordzhonikidze District Invalid Folk Ensemble “Naitie” joins in the celebration of the group’s tenth anniversary following a wildly successful performance at the Omsk Institute for the Deaf by speaking conversationally only in the verse of the iconic twentieth-century Russian bards Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva.<sup>121</sup> Such devices melded the new with the old in Russian life.

Equally important, the authors were not content to limit their creative horizons to Russia alone. International connections and the integration of several movement playwrights into a global theatrical community amplified the movement’s impact. Performances at London’s Royal Court and commissions from the Royal Shakespeare Company ensured a lasting impact that would have been impossible in the isolation of any one country. Continuing support from the Goethe Institute brought Russian contemporary theatre and its creators onto Berlin stages when British support waned in the wake of the British Council’s forced departure from Russia in 2008, which resulted from allegations by Russia’s Federal Security

Service’s (FSB) that the Council was a cover for British intelligence.<sup>122</sup> Similarly, the New York-based Trust for Mutual Understanding—frequently working with the Center for International Theater Development in Baltimore—promoted new Russian playwrights and their works in the United States.<sup>123</sup>

At the same time, the New Russian Drama Movement remains profoundly “Russian” in innumerable ways. Beyond its portrayal of Russian circumstances and characters, its practitioners retain a deeply Russian fascination with spirituality in the face of degradation. This “Russian-ness” rests, as well, on the provincial backgrounds of so many of its leading lights. Several of its playwrights were born and raised in a provincial Russia far removed from Moscow. Their preoccupations are those of Russian life outside the capital.<sup>124</sup> They are first and foremost products of alternative cultural centers in places that generally are not thought of as having a culture at all. This pattern is nowhere more evident than in Yekaterinburg, a city that, it turns out, somewhat surprisingly has produced a post-Soviet culture that now circles the globe.<sup>125</sup>

## THE POWER OF PERSONALITY

Nikolai Kolyada became a center of gravity around which much of the new drama world of Yekaterinburg revolved. He was born in 1957 in the bleak and remote provincial settlement of Presnogor’kovka in the Kustanay Region just across the Russian-Kazakh border south of the Siberian city of Chelyabinsk.<sup>126</sup> He trundled off to the Sverdlovsk Theatre School at a young age, graduating at twenty to begin a career on stage with the Sverdlovsk Academic Theatre of Drama. The aspiring actor played the sort of wide range of ever more prominent roles that are typical of the Russian repertoire, including increasingly important parts in plays by Nikolai Gogol, Alexander Ostrovsky, and Mikhail Bulgakov. Drawn to writing, Kolyada enrolled at the prestigious Gorky

Literary Institute in Moscow to study with the prominent writer Vyacheslav Shugaev. This move brought him to Moscow at the height of the excitement and ferment prompted by Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring) policies.

Kolyada immediately became a cause. An early 1986 play, *Slingshot*, which was sympathetic to a gay relationship, shocked Moscow readers and was prohibited from being staged.<sup>127</sup> Then Roman Viktyuk, a controversial Moscow director born in the Western city of L'viv when it was still part of interwar Poland, arranged for this work to be performed at the San Diego Repertory Theater. Kolyada found an enthusiastic reception and became an international sensation for the first time.<sup>128</sup> After graduating from the Gorky Institute in 1989, Kolyada returned to Sverdlovsk and, since 1994, has taught at the Yekaterinburg Theatrical Institute, offering one of the few playwriting and dramaturge curricula in Russia.

Once back in the Urals, Kolyada began to write plays (more than one hundred, of which more than half have been performed in Russia and abroad), to teach others to write and act (his students include some of Russia's most exciting young playwrights, e.g., Anna Baturina, Anna Bogcheva, Oleg Bogyaev, Nadezhda Koltysheva, Yaroslava Pulinovich, and Vasilii Sigarev), to direct and produce plays, to organize theatre festivals (e.g., the Eurasian Drama Competition Festival, which began in 2003, as well as the Kolyada-Plays Festival, which began in 2006, together with the earlier "Real Theater Festival," which has been an annual event since the beginning of the decade), and to serve as an intellectual leader in the Urals region (as confirmed by his decade-long editorship of the journal *Ural*).<sup>129</sup>

In December 2001, Kolyada founded his own theatre company, which initially performed at the Pushkin House in a historic Yekaterinburg neighborhood. In 2004, the company moved to its own small stage in

a nineteenth-century mansion, where it performed a contemporary repertoire for adults and children's plays for younger audiences. But trouble loomed, with the company being displaced after a fire and only regaining very cramped temporary quarters after raucous protests, hunger strikes by Kolyada himself, and the eventual intervention of Sverdlovsk governor Alexander Misharin in November 2010. Plans for a newly constructed permanent home for the company were announced in March 2011, with construction set to begin in 2012.<sup>130</sup>

Kolyada's plays focus sharply on the inner disorientation of post-Soviet life. As Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky suggest, "Kolyada's characters fail to communicate with each other and with the world because of . . . problems of transfer and reception. They resort often to performative ways of expressing their inner world, exploring the borderline between reality and the imagination."<sup>131</sup>

In Kolyada's play *The Old Hare*, for example, the audience sees two newly arriving guests at a less-than-deluxe provincial hotel bump into each other wandering the halls trying to figure out how to get service from the hotel staff. They strike up a conversation that begins with complaints about telephones and quickly becomes a discourse about the meaning of post-Soviet life. At one point late in the play, the woman—an actress from Moscow—becomes unwound, declaring one of the central realities of the last Soviet generation: Everyone lived and lives in fear. "Cursed life!" she explodes, "Cursed life! Hellish life! For what, for what, for what is all this—this, this torment, for what? Sir, I have lived my entire life in fear. This isn't just because I am an artist. Even if I were not an artist I would have lived my entire life in fear just the same, in fear, in fright just to survive."<sup>132</sup>

As important as Kolyada has been for the theatrical and cultural scene in Yekaterinburg, his ambitions extend far beyond its boundaries. He is seeking to free Russian theatre from its traditional fixation with director-producers

(*rezhissery*) to find a new focus on writers. Although many abroad think of great Russian playwrights such as Anton Chekhov, the national theatrical tradition—in a pattern reinforced during the Soviet period—has tended to elevate director-producers to a higher status than actors and writers. The New Russian Drama Movement is revolutionary in part because of its fascination with the underside of life, but in large measure because of its attention to the act of writing—as revealed in Kolyada’s activities in Yekaterinburg.<sup>133</sup>

This commitment to writing becomes especially evident in the city’s Eurasian Drama Competition, which has become a showcase for Russian-language playwrights living in Russia as well as abroad and attracts as many as five hundred submissions from aspiring authors each year. Winning plays are published in *Ural*, thereby promoting their performance far beyond local stages.<sup>134</sup> The Kolyada-Plays Festival concentrates more directly on the work of Kolyada himself and his students. For example, the 2011 festival presented twenty-three productions and readings of works by his top students—Vasily Sigarev, Yaroslava Pulinovich, Oleg Bogayev, Vladimir Zuyev, and the twenty-six-year-old Anna Baturina.<sup>135</sup> These efforts built on the success of the “Real Theater” Festival, which was spurred by the Liubimovka workshops at the start of the previous decade to showcase works by authors participating in the emerging New Russian Drama Movement.<sup>136</sup>

A number of leading playwrights and lesser authors have emerged from Kolyada’s “incubator,” as Yana Ross has called it.<sup>137</sup> Their works include plays about troops returning from Chechnya, haunting encounters by soldiers with their past, living spirits and dying souls, the tragedy of terrorism (e.g., plays about the 2004 attack on a school in the Caucasus town of Beslan), and harsh depictions of corruption, infidelity, alcoholism, drug abuse, the indignities of age, and social inequality.<sup>138</sup>

In the end, these plays are about how society relates to events more than about the events themselves. Sonya, in Pavel Kazantsev’s *Hero*, speaks of a fundamental conundrum of life in contemporary Russia as being a strange detachment from reality. Speaking with her new lover, a returning war hero, Egor, Sonya declares, “When I watch stories about the war on the news, it seems to me that nothing is real. Well, in the sense that there are tanks, and soldiers, and destruction everywhere, and shooting every day, and it is dangerous to be out on the streets. But you hear this on television, eating a large sausage and cheese sandwich. It’s simple. It’s all the same for you.”<sup>139</sup>

More than just telling a story, though, the writers seek humanity among even their most questionable characters. In Kazantsev’s and Yaroslava Pylinovich’s *The Cleaners*, a young man and woman meet in a supermarket, where the woman apparently is trying to buy a new dress. As the play unfolds, the audience learns that both are shoplifters. The man, who is driven less by material vanity than by a need to survive, finally confronts the young lady. “What do you want?” he asks. “A magical wand? A sling with arrows? That’s all I know, all I learned from you. The rest is improvisation. . . . The world exists even without money, but money does not exist without the world. Your money can open a theatre, a cinema studio, a kindergarten; but you, except for your money, are nothing of interest.”<sup>140</sup>

At the same time, there is often a humane sympathy for an older generation that survived the travails of life in the Soviet Union. In Nina Sadur’s *Pilot*, which was published in early 2011, eighty-year-old Paolo berates thirteen-year-old Lena for criticizing her father for his life during the Soviet period. “He knew how to dream,” Paolo tells Lena, as if the youngster does not. “He believed in Stalin. I excuse you—what do you know about him? You didn’t live then! He would say: It is so cold and lonely driving trucks along the roads of our motherland. It happens, he told me, when he



was a young long-range driver that he would drive for days without meeting anyone. He told me about all he had on those long routes was a portrait of Comrade Stalin flapping on the rearview mirror, watching over him as he flew along—as he was flying somewhere through the endless deserts of this land. And Comrade Stalin had such a harsh gaze. You looked at him and you could not fall asleep. This is the country you were born in.”<sup>141</sup>

Sadur—who was born in 1950, well before many practitioners of the New Russian Drama, and has no direct connection to Yekaterinburg—is well respected by many who identify with the New Russia Drama Movement, despite being considerably older. She chose to publish her work in *Ural* in recognition of the journal’s national scope and reputation.

## STUDENTS AND DISCIPLES

Beyond Kolyada, several Yekaterinburg playwrights have contributed to the transformation of writing for the Russian stage. At least four among them—Vassily Sigarev, Oleg Bogayev, and the Presnyakov brothers Vladimir and Oleg—have become international sensations on their own terms.

As noted at the outset, Sigarev set the London stage world abuzz with the premiere performance of *Plasticine* at the Royal Court Theatre. Born in 1977, the native of the small Sverdlovsk Region settlement of Verkhnaia Salda made his way to study with Kolyada via a two-year stint at the Nizhny Tagil Pedagogical Institute.<sup>142</sup> Sigarev was a fully formed writer by the time he came to work with Kolyada. In 2000, he completed *Plasticine*, which immediately began to attract attention in Russia. The play was produced in Moscow’s Playwright and Director Center following the award of his Russian “Anti-Booker” Prize, and from there was translated into English and brought to the Royal Court.<sup>143</sup> Simultaneously, he wrote two other successful plays, *Black Milk* and *Ladybird*, both of which

similarly won considerable praise in London. More recently, he has expanded his writing to include screenplays. He won international praise and attention for both his writing and his film direction with his 2009 film *Wolfy*, a tale about a young girl left to her own devices by an alcoholic and abusive mother.<sup>144</sup>

Of all these works, *Black Milk* perhaps has had the most success internationally, being staged across Europe and North America. One of its first U.S. productions, at Washington’s Studio Theater in early 2005, brought particular acclaim, helping to promote the play to other theatres around the country.<sup>145</sup> The story transpires in a provincial train station from which two small-time con artists—a young couple representing the urban “sophistication” of the “new” Russia—travel to small towns around Russia selling outrageously priced and ultimately useless toasters in order to bamboozle the unsophisticated locals. The play paints an especially bleak picture of post-Soviet Russia in which everyone, it seems, is a ruthless, sleazy, violent, and/or alcoholic predatory con artist, and in which even the wise old peasant lady selling train tickets turns out to have been selling poisoned moonshine from under the counter. A moment of possible redemption—after the toaster saleswoman gives birth, claims to have seen God, and proclaims her desire to remain in the virtuous country—collapses, so that at the end, the message is clear: One new child—or many—will not alleviate Russia’s physical and spiritual suffering.

Oleg Bogayev, whose *Russian National Postal Service* was staged by the Studio Theater during its 2004–5 season, presents a no less chilling account of human relationships in Boris Yeltsin’s Russia.<sup>146</sup> Bogayev takes us to the cluttered, tiny apartment of a lone retiree, Ivan Zhukov, who, like many of his generation, worked all his life only to end up with nothing following the collapse of the Soviet economy. Living on an inadequate pension that barely covers the cost of his food, he holes up at home, slowly entering into a fantasyland in which the Queen

of England, Lenin, a cosmonaut, Martians, and others visit for tea. He continues his friendship with these imaginary characters once they depart his abode through correspondence sent via the Russian National Postal Service. And he quietly slips from life as his upstairs neighbors are busy loudly celebrating New Year's Eve (and the dawn of a "new" Russia). Bogayev's dark and offbeat humor humanizes an otherwise tragic character who has been degraded like many of his compatriots by age, insanity, and economic collapse.<sup>147</sup>

Bogayev simultaneously is playing his own game with classical Russian literature. Zhukov shares his name with the protagonist of Anton Chekhov's short story "Van'ka Zhukov." As the dramatist Andrei Maleev-Babel has observed, the character in Chekhov's story, an abused boy, writes a letter to his grandfather, who lives in the village, asking the grandfather to come to town to rescue him. The boy addresses the letter "To my grandfather, at the village," and takes it off to the post office to mail it, absolutely convinced that the letter will reach his grandfather. This hopeless situation is repeated in the *Russian National Postal Service*, which makes the play in part a holistic reference to Chekhov and his work.<sup>148</sup>

These works earned Bogayev several awards, including the Russian "Anti-Booker" Prize and Russia's highest theatrical award, Moscow's Golden Mask, as well as leading to his being celebrated at the Royal Court. The success of his works at Washington's Studio Theater led to numerous other performances around the United States. Several of his three-dozen other plays have had wide success around Russia, Europe, and North America, including an especially well-received production of *Maria's Field* at Chicago's highly regarded Tuta Theater.<sup>149</sup>

Bogayev, who was born in 1970, retains a strong commitment to his native Yekaterinburg despite his wider success. He was one of the first graduates of Kolyada's program at the Yekaterinburg State Theatre Institute, and he

has continued to work with the local drama scene, mentoring younger writers, producers, and directors. He began serving as editor of *Ural* after Kolyada stepped down from that position in August 2010.<sup>150</sup> The journal has continued to promote young writers and playwrights under his stewardship.

The Presnyakov brothers—Oleg, born in 1969, and Vladimir, born in 1974—represent yet another face of the Yekaterinburg theatrical scene. The Presnyakovs are not students of Kolyada, even having had a tumultuous relationship with their elder. Following the New York run of their play *Terrorism*, Murph Henderson wrote in *American Theatre* magazine that the Presnyakovs once had visited the editorial offices of *Ural* to ask Kolyada if they could call themselves his students even though they had never studied with him. "Three years later," Henderson reports, they "publicly disavowed the connection, declaring Kolyada's theatre a *kolkhoz*—that is, a [Soviet-era collective] farm worked by peasants—and calling themselves 'intellectuals.' Kolyada has posted a sign above his office door at the theatre that reads 'head of the *kolkhoz*.'" <sup>151</sup>

The Presnyakov brothers were sons of an Iranian mother and a Russian father, and they graduated from the Philological Faculty at Urals State University, where they have both taught. Oleg completed graduate school in literature, while Vladimir studied pedagogy in graduate school.<sup>152</sup> Their most successful plays—*Playing the Victim*, *Killing the Judge*, and *Terrorism*—make direct reference to the Russian classics. By drawing on one of the grand themes of Russian literature—conflict among generations—the Presnyakovs bring a bittersweet sensibility to conflicts that often prove fatal.<sup>153</sup> Their version of the fairy tale *The Humpbacked Little Horse* revealed a similar compelling sympathy for the more magical dimensions of Russian cultural and literary traditions. Several of their plays have moved successfully from the stage to film, with Kirill Serebrennikov's retelling of *Playing the Victim*

earning major awards at film festivals in Sochi and Rome.<sup>154</sup>

The success of several Presnyakov plays abroad speaks to their ability to address fears shared by many far beyond the boundaries of today's Russian Federation. In *Terrorism*, a group of disgruntled passengers and policemen bicker, commit adultery, make fun of one another, and even commit suicide while delayed by an airport bomb scare. Deeper connections among the passengers slowly emerge once the plane finally takes off. In *Playing the Victim*, a university dropout finds work with the police playing the victim in the reconstruction of murders. The young Silver Age poets Andrei Bely and Alexander Blok, and his mother, Alexandra Kublitskaia-Piottukh, roam through a cheerful farce in *Captive Spirits*, and the carnival of contemporary Russian life is portrayed in *Europe-Asia*. On one level, these works are about a “global f\*#k-up” that is shared by all twenty-first-century humans; on another, they offer a penetrating critique of violence and an emerging Russian fascism.<sup>155</sup>

As the Presnyakovs' evolving relationship with Yekaterinburg suggests, the local theatre scene is far wider than any single writer or group of writers and performers. The Kolyada group thrives within a wide theatrical scene in which all varieties of performing arts engage the city around them. Beyond classical drama, the city is home to a highly innovative and artistically successful puppet theatre that has won various national and international prizes, including the Golden Mask.<sup>156</sup>

The Yekaterinburg Theatre of Musical Comedy similarly collected many honors under the talented directorship of Vladimir Kurochkin during the late Soviet period. Kurochkin was the first Soviet director to bring *Hello, Dolly*, in 1974, and he tried but failed to follow with *Cabaret* and *Fiddler on the Roof*.<sup>157</sup> The theatre has continued to garner awards such as the Golden Mask in more recent times while pushing the boundaries of the Russian musical.<sup>158</sup> For example, the production by

the composer Sergei Dreznin and lyricists Mikhail Roshchin and Alexander Anno of the sprawling epic *Catherine the Great* proved as controversial for its slyly satirical stance toward Russian history as told by contemporary “patriots” as for its widespread use of the latest staging techniques from London's West End and New York's Broadway.

This *Catherine the Great* was considered by some critics to be Russia's first homegrown musical, as the genre is understood in the Anglo-American world, and the Yekaterinburg production raised standards for musicals to the level of the “Hollywood blockbuster or a West End hit.”<sup>159</sup> Yet even after being nominated for seven Golden Masks in 2009, the production ultimately challenged too many Russian assumptions about history and musical drama to find acceptance in Moscow.

## A WONDROUS MIRROR

Recent Yekaterinburg theatre seasons have included new directors, new plays, new writers, and new stars as the local opera company, ballet company, academic dramatic theatre, children's theater, and smaller chamber theaters (e.g., those organized by Kolyada and the Presnyakovs). They generated, in the words of the critic Kasia Popova, “a living and disturbing organism which has its own laws that are no less wondrous than those of the laws of nature.”<sup>160</sup>

As Popova concludes in a review of the entire 2006–7 drama season, Yekaterinburg theatre in all its rich diversity has become a mirror for the city itself. Local productions—whether they are tragedies or dark comedies, multi-act or single-act productions, allegories or high realism—share a concern with the joys and pains of everyday life as seen in a turbulent society. They emerge from the individual keyboards of writers who are embedded in a wider community of writers and theatrical institutions; writers engaged in a common search for meaning in a city, a society, and a

country where every marker of stability and identity has vanished.<sup>161</sup>

One young man in Oleg Bogayev's *Thirty Three Happinesses* captures the ethos of the twenty-first-century Yekaterinburg stage when he declares, "You know,... there is nothing. There is nothing in our flags, in our laughs, in our songs,... around any home, any person, any song, are the slogans of an important language. All around us in any city there is nothing of ours. We have awoken in a different country. They tell me that we live in a new world. We now live in a capitalist country."<sup>162</sup> The New Russian Drama Movement—as it has blossomed in Yekaterinburg and elsewhere—is a search for how to make this new country one's own.

The message of these works parallels Valentin Lukyanin's city "soul," about which he wrote in an ode to Yekaterinburg. "In fact," the city's literary master penned, "we need to recognize that nothing real has changed for the past twenty years in the urban environment. Maybe there is graffiti but in fact everything is what it was. We have our socialist capital, or our 'almost Chicago,' and all of what we see is a result of not just policy, but of human activity, how we live in our city and how we use it." Yekaterinburg's message to post-Soviet Russia seems to be to move beyond policies and politics and to focus on how to live, how to make use of life. Only then does humanity glimmer in even the bleakest landscape.

Yekaterinburg's playwrights, directors, producers, and actors are hardly unique on the Russian stage, in that the travails of post-Soviet Russian life have inspired one of this new century's most vibrant national theatre scenes. The Togliatti writers—Iurii Klavdiev, Mikhail and Vyacheslav Durnenkov, Rostov-na-Donu's Sergei Medvedev, Khanty-Mansiysk's Bulat Shiribazarov, and Nizhny Tagil's Ekaterina Vasilyeva, to name just a few—have written works that have electrified, shocked, disturbed, and inspired audiences on stage, screen, and television.<sup>163</sup> Yekaterinburg's Urals competitor

Perm has made an ambitious commitment to the visual arts by allocating 3 percent of the regional budget to promote cultural development.<sup>164</sup> These policies are producing a vibrant and noteworthy theatrical world all its own. Tellingly, Russia's and Yekaterinburg's new theatrical life exists largely beyond the reach and control of Moscow's artistic Mandarins. Kolyada, Sigaryev, Bogayev, the Presniakovs, and their counterparts elsewhere around Russia have their own direct paths to the outside world. Collectively, Russian playwrights have given meaning to life in an era of Russian history when nothing other than material wealth seems of value. Through their frank, bleak, and brutal portrayals of everyday life outside Russia's "two capitals" (e.g., Moscow and Saint Petersburg) they have reinfused magic, spirituality, truth-seeking, a sense of awareness, and humanity into the Russian sense of self.

Yet as important as these individual writers and the cities that inspire them may be, Yekaterinburg remains the leading center of a new approach to theatre and to writing that holds the promise of a new "golden age" for the Russian stage.<sup>165</sup> Because it is a city full of the most troubling and vexing contradictions of Russia itself, Yekaterinburg's turning of the urban kaleidoscope has been just fast enough to produce the urban delirium that has prompted human creativity for centuries. A deep foundation in gritty daily reality simultaneously prevents even the most soaring flight of urban fancy from leaving the orbit of human existence.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Brigit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, *Performing Violence. Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama* (Chicago: Intellect, 2009), 152–59; John Freedman, “Contemporary Russian Drama: The Journey from Stagnation to a Golden Age,” *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 3 (October 2010), pp. 389–420.
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- 3 Ibid., 152.
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- 5 Ibid., 156.
- 6 Ibid., 152.
- 7 Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, 1855 edition.
- 8 For a history of the Royal Court, see Philip Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- 9 Michael Billington, “Plasticine,” *The Guardian*, March 22, 2002.
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- 12 Hedy Weiss, “A Voice from Mother Russia,” *Chicago Sunday Sun-Times*, November 21, 2003.
- 13 A. A. Starikov, V. E. Zavgel’skaia, L. I. Tokmenninova, and E. V. Cherniak, *Ekaterinburg: Istoriia goroda v arkhitekture* (Yekaterinburg: Sokrat, 2008).
- 14 Dmitrii Babil’skii, “Demidovskii vremennik,” *Ural*, 1996, no. 2.
- 15 Edward Ames, “A Century of Russian Railroad Construction: 1837–1938,” *American Slavic and East European Review* 6, nos. 3–4 (1947): 57–74; the citation here is on 67.
- 16 Irina Antropova, “Iz istorii evreev Urala,” *Ural*, 2004, No. 11.
- 17 For an overview of the history of the Pale of Settlement, see Nathaniel Deutsch, *The Jewish Dark Continent: Life and Death in the Russian Pale of Settlement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).
- 18 Leon Aron, *Yeltsin: A Revolutionary Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 12.
- 19 Antropova, “Iz istorii evreev Urala.”
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 This observation is developed further by Arkadii Bartov, “Mif Sankt-Peterburga: Etalon giperreal’nosti i kul’tura vtorichnosti,” *Ural*, 2005, no. 8. The practicality of Urals intellectual life is reflected in the region’s primary prerevolutionary scientific honor, an annual award established by Imperial chamberlain Pavel Nikolaevich Demidov in 1831. The awards promoted the work in physics, chemistry, geology, biology, astronomy, and the earth sciences before being suspended in 1866 in accordance with the original bequest a quarter century after Demidov’s death. Reconstituted in 1993, the contemporary incarnation of the Demidov Prize more often recognizes work in the humanities and social sciences. For discussion of this award and its history, see Andrei Ponizovkin, “Sobitie: Laureaty demidovskoi premii,” *Ural*, 1996, no. 2.
- 24 This point is expanded upon along various dimensions of cultural life in such articles as that by Ol’ga Bukharkina, “Vdol’ po ulitse po glavnoi,” *Ural*, 2000, no. 12; and Sergei Beliaev, “Vecher budetlian: Nemuzykal’nie sametko o muzykal’nom zale,” *Ural*, 2005, no. 11.
- 25 Robert Service, *A History of Twentieth-Century Russia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 107.

- Boris Yeltsin, then the Sverdlovsk regional party first secretary, dispatched wrecking crews in the middle of an autumn 1977 night to tear the house down on orders from then-KGB chairman Iurii Andropov. This story is told by Aron, *Yeltsin*, 112–14.
- 26 James R. Harris, *The Great Urals: Regionalism and the Evolution of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), 102.
- 27 R. W. Davies, “Industry under Central Planning, 1929–1941,” in *The Economic Transformation of the Soviet Union, 1913–1945*, edited by R. W. Davies, Mark Harrison, and S. C. Wheatcroft (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 135–57.
- 28 Valentin Luk’ianin, “Gorod i dusha: Chelovek stroit gorod—gorod stroit cheloveka,” *Ural*, 2008, no. 8.
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- 30 Luk’ianin, “Gorod i dusha.”
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 See Raisa Gilyova, “Boites’ snobizma: Otbiraite istinno prekrasnoe,” *Ural*, 2010, no. 12; Igor Turbanov, “Ekaterinburg: Piat’ blikov,” *Ural*, 2010, no. 4; Sofid Demidova, “Deistvo v Sverdlovsk,” *Ural*, 2011, no. 6; Valentin Luk’ianin, “Zhizn’ posle zhizni (o ‘donnykh ottozhenniakh’ uralskoi literatury),” *Ural*, 1996, no. 4; Aron, *Yeltsin*, 106–8; and these Web sites: [www.uralopera.ru](http://www.uralopera.ru), [www.muzkom.net](http://www.muzkom.net), and [culture.ekburg.ru/institutions/theatre/](http://culture.ekburg.ru/institutions/theatre/).
- 33 Valentin Luk’ianin, “Smotrie chashche v nebo, gospoda,” *Ural*, 2002, no. 10.
- 34 Inna Gladkova, “Belyi dom iz krasnogo kirpicha,” *Ural*, 2000, no. 11.
- 35 Harris, *Great Urals*, 32–36.
- 36 Aron, *Yeltsin*, 13.
- 37 Luk’ianin, “Smotrie chashche v nebo, gospoda.”
- 38 Luk’ianin, “Gorod i dusha.”
- 39 Jeanne Guillemin, “The 1979 Anthrax Epidemic in the USSR: Applied Science and Political Controversy,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 146, no. 1 (2002): 18–36.
- 40 Aron, *Yeltsin*, 52–105.
- 41 Ibid, 14.
- 42 Ibid, 48–128.
- 43 Luk’ianin, “Gorod i dusha.”
- 44 Aron, *Yeltsin*, 106–8.
- 45 Stephen Handelman, *Comrade Criminal: Russia’s New Mafiya* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 73–92, 234–37, 332–47.
- 46 The heading above, “*The Second Front*,” is the title of the local rock band’s Agata Kristi’s 1988 debut album, *Vtoroi front*.
- 47 Artemy Troitsky, *Back in the USSR: The True Story of Rock in Russia* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1988), 13–23.
- 48 Viktor Slavkin, *Pamiatnik neizvestnomu stiliage: Istoriia pokoleniia v anekdotakh, legendakh, baikakh, pesniakh* (Moscow: Artist, 1996).
- 49 S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Pia Koivunen, “The 1957 Moscow Youth Festival: Propagating a New, Peaceful Image of the Soviet Union,” in *Soviet State and Society under Nikita Khrushchev*, edited by Melane Ilic and Jeremy Smith (New York: Routledge, 2009), 46–65.
- 50 Troitsky, *Back in the USSR*, 22–29.
- 51 Ibid., 23.
- 52 Ibid., 30–50.
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