

# Transnational Theatre: 'New Drama' in the Post-Soviet Russophone Space

Report on phase 2 of the project (1 November 2017 – 30 September 2019)

PI: Professor Julie Curtis  
(University of Oxford – satellite partner)

## OVERVIEW

Our seedcorn phase had focused on the transnational dimensions of independent Russophone theatre production across Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, especially so-called 'New Drama' and this mostly in the early years of the Putin regime. As a transnational endeavour New Drama has, however, become more fragmented during the late 2010s due to political tensions in the region. These issues, often reflected in language choices, are leading to a sharper separation of cultural identities across the three countries in question, and our research traces and analyses these transformations in contemporary culture.

Moreover, the year 2018 was marked by the premature deaths of Mikhail Ugarov and Elena Gremina, founders of Moscow's influential Teatr.doc, soon followed by the loss of Elyse Dodgson, International Director of London's Royal Court Theatre. As it happens, all three of these key figures in the New Drama movement had attended workshops that we held in Oxford in the last five years. It looks likely that their passing will mark the drawing to a close of this movement, which had united independent theatre across Russia, Ukraine and Belarus since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

During phase 2 we took the project in a new direction by focusing our attention onto *representations of homosexuality and gender identity issues* in contemporary theatre in Russia and Ukraine. This follows on naturally from our earlier broader explorations of the story of 'New Drama' during phase 1, by narrowing in on a case-study which acts as a highly controversial benchmark for the new pressures constraining artistic, social and legal spheres in Russia today.

The project has taken on a heightened topical significance, and has become a study of the politics of culture in the last ten years in Russia and Ukraine. New developments have emerged as the result of a slew of new legislation in the cultural sphere as Russian authorities tighten their control over the arts. And while things in Russia appear to be moving in an increasingly reactionary direction, reminiscent for some of the state-controlled world of Soviet-era Socialist Realism, culture in Ukraine is striking out in new directions, now almost entirely independent of Russian trends.

## RESEARCHERS

As lead researcher, Professor Curtis spent her research time exploring texts and productions, organising the 2019 workshop, writing up a chapter for the volume *Transnational Russian Studies* (LUP, 2019), edited by A. Byford, C. Doak and S. Hutchings, and editing the forthcoming volume on 'New Drama', to be published by Bloomsbury in June 2020 (see below). Professor Philip Bullock also shared in the organisation and implementation of these projects, while further support was provided, as required, by Dr Noah Birksted-Breen in his capacity as research assistant.

In the next and final phase of the project, Dr Birksted-Breen will, in his capacity as Artistic Director of Sputnik Theatre in London, prepare the rehearsed reading of a Russian-language play with queer themes, planned for the summer of 2020. All three researchers will also co-author an article on the topic of queer drama in Russia and Ukraine by the end of the project.

## CONFERENCE PANEL

In November 2017, the research findings from phase 1 were presented to an international audience at the annual ASEES conference in Chicago.

The details of this panel were as follows:

### *Overstepping Transnational Boundaries: 21<sup>st</sup>-century Theatre and Drama*

'New Drama' plays written in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been startlingly transgressive in language, content and form: many of these developments emerged through shared drama workshops and festivals. In this panel we examined how such transnational achievements and collaborations have been affected by more recent political tensions in the region.

Noah Birksted-Breen, Queen Mary, University of London and University of Oxford

#### 'Before and After the Maidan: The Shifting Landscape of Ukrainian Playwriting'

The popular uprising in 2013-14 (the Maidan) polarised Ukrainian civil society's sense of identity as either pro-European or pro-Russian. The paper documents how this event translated into the sphere of professional theatre. Through interviews with playwrights and directors of the post-Soviet generation in Kyiv, the paper discusses how Maidan influenced the self-identification of artists with a political mission, how it enhanced their sense of responsibility to liberalise theatre in order to play a role in forging a transnational, pro-European Ukrainian identity, and how this then affected their relationships with Russian theatre-makers.

Tania Arcimovič, Belarus

#### 'Transformations in the Language of "New Drama" in Belarus as a Representation of a New Model of Identity'

The Soviet period saw a process of Russification in Belarus. Representations of the everyday in Belarus's 'New Drama' (e.g. in plays by Priazhko, Khalezin, Rossol'ko and Steshik) have mostly been expressed in Russian, and have naturally found an appreciative audience in Russia as well. But more recently bilingual works, or works written entirely in Belarusian, have started to appear, reflecting new socio-political developments in the post-Soviet space, and offering a different model of Belarusian identity.

Julie A.E. Curtis, University of Oxford

#### 'The Liubimovka Theatre Festival: Playwriting across Borders'

The annual Liubimovka Theatre Festival in Moscow has been showcasing the best of contemporary playwriting in Russian for over 25 years by staging rehearsed readings of winning plays by younger writers from all over the Russian Federation, but also from other countries where plays are written in Russian, such as Ukraine, Belarus and Latvia. Transnational co-operation of this kind has fostered further collaborations in the form of shared workshops, exchanges, and pedagogic and community activities. This paper traces this example of transnational activity in theatre, which has attempted to continue over recent years in defiance of international political tensions.

## WORKSHOP

We held a two-day workshop on 6-7 June 2019 at Wolfson College, University of Oxford, entitled 'Staging Queer Lives in Russia and Ukraine'. This was an international event for theatre-makers, academics and postgraduate students that explored the representation of queer identities in post-Soviet theatre and drama.

The research questions we asked included:

- How do playwrights represent queer lives on stage in contemporary Russia and post-Maidan Ukraine?
- What sources, narratives and traditions do Russian and Ukrainian draw on when telling the lives of queer subjects?
- What resistance is encountered when staging queer lives in post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine, and to what extent have artists overcome them?
- How might queer performance in post-Soviet culture be conceptualised – as a national, transnational or local phenomenon?
- What acts of 'queering translation' are needed to realise a poetic journey from post-Soviet performance to UK stage?

The event included round-table discussions to consider the presence of queer drama on Russian and Ukrainian stages, in relation to shifting cultural and geopolitical realities, and also to examine what has been the effect in the cultural sphere of the 2013 Russian legislation outlawing 'the propaganda of non-traditional relationships'. There were also practical workshops on translation involving playwrights, actors and translators, exploring issues ranging from accuracy and appropriateness through to 'performability'.

### Workshop Programme

#### Thursday 6 June

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| 10-11.15    | Welcome, followed by roundtable discussion to consider the presence of queer drama on Russian and Ukrainian stages, in relation to shifting cultural and geopolitical realities, with speakers from the region including the playwrights Maksym Kurochkin (Ukraine), Anastasia Patlay (Moscow), as well as the scholars Dan Healey (University of Oxford), Julie Cassiday (Williams College, MA) and Alex Kondakov (Aleksanteri Institute, Helsinki).  |
| 11.15-11.45 | Coffee   |
| 11.45-13.00 | A translation workshop using an extract from Darina Borisenko's play <i>Degenerat</i> (2018), and exploring issues ranging from accuracy and appropriateness through to 'performability'. Led by Noah Birksted-Breen and including: Alex Thomas; Veniamin Gushchin; Angus Russell; Sarah Vitali; Charlotte Dowling; Fiona Bell with Irina Pavlova; Alex Braslavsky.  |
| 13.00-14.15 | Lunch  |
| 14.15-16.00 | Replicating the actual processes of play selection in Britain, our colleagues from Russia and Ukraine have been asked each to introduce and recommend a play written in Russian in either country, and involving queer themes or gender issues, which might prove suitable for an eventual staging in London. Rehearsed readings of extracts from these plays will be provided by professional actors, and the plays' merits will be discussed. The concept of 'queering translation' across cultures will be explored, and those present will be invited to nominate one of the plays for further consideration by Sputnik Theatre (London). Texts of the extracts (in Russian and English) will be provided. Led by Noah Birksted-Breen, Maksym Kurochkin and Anastasia Patlay, with discussant Richard Wesley Huddleson (QMUL). |
| 16.00-19.30 | Tea, followed by free time and supper for invited guests   |
| 19.30-22.00 | Showing of Kirill Serebrennikov's film <i>(M)uchenik (The Martyr)/The Student</i> , followed by Q&A (free, and open to the public).  |

## Friday 7 June

- 9.30-10.15: What has been the effect in the cultural sphere of the 2013 Russian legislation outlawing 'the propaganda of non-traditional relationships'? Roundtable with Julie Cassiday (USA), Anastasia Patlay (Moscow) and Alex Kondakov (Aleksanteri Institute, Helsinki) in conversation with Philip Bullock about Russian and Ukrainian responses to Eurovision, drag queens in Russian and Ukrainian culture, and the broader intellectual hinterland of queer performance.
- 10.15-10.45 Coffee
- 10.45-12.00 Showing of Kirill Serebrennikov's short film *The Phonograph* (2016), which offers a glimpse of Tchaikovsky's world. Roundtable discussion of what, if anything, is queer about this work – and about the film *(M)uchenik* – as part of a general examination of queer lives and their representation in Russian and Ukrainian theatre, film, ballet and opera.

### The full list of those attending:

#### Organisers

Noah Birksted-Breen (Sputnik Theatre)  
Professor Philip Bullock (University of Oxford)  
Professor Julie Curtis (University of Oxford)

#### Performers

Sebastian Aguirre  
Sophia Kayes  
Rebecca Peyton

#### Speakers

Anastasiia Patlay (theatre-maker, Moscow)  
Maksym Kurochkin (theatre-maker, Kyiv)  
Richard Huddleson (QMUL)  
Jack Clover (theatre-maker)  
Julie Cassiday (Williams College)  
Alex Thomas (University of Oxford)  
Alex Kondakov (Aleksanteri Institute, Helsinki)  
Larissa Itina (Anglo-Russian Culture Club, London)  
John Farndon (theatre-maker)

Dan Healey (University of Oxford)  
Molly Flynn (Birkbeck, University of London)  
Stephen Hutchings (University of Manchester)  
Galina Miazhevich (Cardiff University)  
Sarah Vitali (Harvard University)  
Yulia Savikovskaya (theatre-maker)

#### Other attendees

Polly Jones  
Oliver Ready  
Melissa Purkiss  
Charlotte Dowling  
Fiona Bell  
Angus Russell  
Margaret Frainier  
Veniamin Gushchin  
Irina Pavlova  
Alex Braslavsky

## PUBLICATIONS

1) Julie Curtis, 'The Politics of Theatre: "New Drama" in Russian, across Post-Soviet Borders and Beyond', in *Transnational Russian Studies*, edited by Andy Byford, Connor Doak and Stephen Hutchings (Liverpool University Press, 2019), pp. 169-182.

2) J.A.E. Curtis (ed.), *New Drama in Russian: Performance, Politics and Protest in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (Bloomsbury, 2020). For full details see: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/new-drama-in-russian-9781788313506/>

### Reviews of *New Drama in Russian*:

"Combining insightful analysis of specific texts, productions, playwrights and theatre directors with interviews with the brightest figures of the Russian stage and a sweeping survey of recent developments in drama in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, this imaginative book is an invaluable source of information about modern Russian drama to date." – *Evgeny Dobrenko, Professor of Russian Studies, University of Sheffield, UK*

"At once skilfully edited and intellectually ambitious, this book offers perhaps the most comprehensive picture of the international theatre movement called New Drama at a time of cultural and political crisis." – *Maksim Hanukaj, Assistant Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA*

"Bringing together young and experienced scholars, playwrights and theatre director, *New Drama in Russian* is a definite must-read for anyone interested in post-socialist theatre and culture in general, as well as for the readers seeking new approaches to politics and activism. This volumes clearly demonstrate how New Drama that started in Russia in the early 2000s with the introduction of verbatim plays, has revolutionized not only Russian, but also Ukrainian and Belorussian cultures, let alone theatre. Furthermore, this volume represents the New Drama as a new artistic discourse on politics – one that doesn't only reflect on political issues, but creates political spaces, dissensus and agon highly need in societies experiencing populist and authoritarian pressure." – *Mark Lipovetsky, Professor of Russian, Columbia University, USA*

## Table of Contents of *New Drama in Russian*:

### *Russia*

1. J.A.E. Curtis (University of Oxford), 'Introduction: Recent Developments in Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian Drama'
2. Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu (CNRS, and Sorbonne University, Paris), 'The story of Russian language drama since 2000: PostDoc, the Postdramatic and Teatr Post'
3. Lucie Kempf (University of Lorraine at Nancy), 'Giving testimony in the face of an authoritarian regime: the evolution of documentary forms at Teatr.doc, the KnAM Theatre, and the Belarus Free Theatre (BFT)'
4. Alexander Trustrum Thomas (University of Oxford), 'From Stalinist Socialist Realism to Putinist Capitalist Realism: Tracing Cultural Ideology in Contemporary Russia'
5. J.A.E. Curtis (University of Oxford), Conversation with Mikhail Durnenkov and Maria Kroupnik, (Liubimovka Festival, Moscow, September 2017)
6. Maria Kroupnik (School of Economic and Social Sciences, Moscow), "'Class Act' in Russia and Ukraine: youth drama projects and social theatre practice'
7. Susanna Weygandt (Sewanee: The University of the South), Conversation with Sasha Denisova (Teatr.doc, Moscow, October 2013)
8. Susanna Weygandt (Sewanee: The University of the South), Conversation with Ivan Vyrypaev (Praktika Theatre, Moscow, May 2013)
9. Valeriia Mutc (Yale University), 'Absence on Stage in Ivan Vyrypaev's *July*'

### *Ukraine*

10. Noah Birksted-Breen (Universities of Oxford and Manchester), 'The Watershed Year of 2014: the 'birth' of Ukrainian New Drama'
11. Jack Clover (independent theatre-maker), 'The Playwright Overlooked: Personal Reflections on Two Years in Ukrainian Theatre (2017-19)'
12. Jack Clover (independent theatre-maker), 'A New 'Dawn' in Ukrainian Theatre: Conversation with Maksym Kurochkin' (April 2019)
13. Molly Flynn (Birkbeck, University of London), 'Stages of Change: Ukraine's Theatre of Displaced People'
14. Molly Thomasy Blasing (University of Kentucky), '«Ne skvernoslov', otets moy» ["Curse not, my son"]: Anna Iablonskaia's *The Pagans* and the Search for a Language of Authenticity'
15. Jessica Hinds-Bond (Northwestern University), 'Natal'ia Vorozhbit's *Viy*: Autoethnography through a Gogolian Lens'

### *Belarus*

16. Tania Arcimovich (Minsk, and Justus-Liebig University, Gießen), 'The transformation of the language of 'New Drama' in Belarus, as a reflection of a new model of identity'
17. J.A.E. Curtis (University of Oxford), Conversation with Natalia Koliada of the Belarus Free Theatre (Young Vic Theatre, London, March 2019)
18. Tania Arcimovich (Minsk, and Justus-Liebig University, Gießen), 'Pavel Priazhko. The Text as an Instant Photograph' (2012); plus Conversation with Pavel Priazhko (2011), and 'Essay on Pavel Priazhko's Methods'
19. Natalia Osis (University of Genoa), 'The artistic space shared by Eastern Slavs, and the ways in which that is created: *The Way People Love* by the Belarusian dramatist Dmitry Bogoslavsky'
20. J.A.E. Curtis (University of Oxford), 'Conclusion – Summer of 2019'
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