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KICKING THE EARTH FROM UNDER YOUR FEET

A Russian Scenographer on Seeing Ordinary Things in New Ways

Highlighting catharsis, transformation and humor, Tatiana Vyushenskaya, a production manager for Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre, discusses classical and contemporary film and theatre: "Even as art spirals into new forms, the old questions remain at the center."

RTE: Tatiana, what is your background and how did you become interested in theatre?

TATIANA: After working in Human Resources for several years after university, I found that I wanted something more creative, so I took a professional course in Interior Style and Decoration at the Academic School of Design in Moscow. I worked privately for some time, and later as senior project designer for an architectural studio in Moscow that collaborates with designers in Italy, France, England and America. As I got further into this, I saw that Europeans had a different approach that I found very attractive. Design in Russia had been almost killed off during the Soviet period, and although later designers tried to salvage something, the tradition was disrupted here in a way that it wasn't in Europe.

One night I saw a documentary on the making of *House*, the television series with Hugh Laurie, my huge love since he first played Bertie in *Jeeves and Wooster*. I was incredibly impressed by the work the show's set designers

Opposite: Tatiana Vyushenskaya, Moscow, 2014.

did, with such care for detail: in season six they featured a ruined 19th-century hospital that they renovated after researching the building's original details and furnishings in photo archives. I began to watch similar documentaries on the work of television set designers and finally thought, "This is what I want to do." In a single year you can work in ten or fifteen different periods and styles, and this is not just painted cardboard sets—it's existential and real.

Then, after meeting with a friend who asked me some difficult and searching questions, I realized that what I wanted was closer to theatre scenography, which has a greater scope for creativity in design. Film design is often quite figurative and realistic. It may use interesting and peculiar interiors, but they still reflect everyday life, while in theatre design you more often have to express an emotion, idea, or an entirely new concept in a tiny space or with very few details. You must push yourself really hard to do that.

RTE: And express it well enough so that the audience recognizes it?

TATIANA: Not necessarily the whole audience, but it should be understood somehow. Contemporary theatre directors, writers and scenographers don't look for universal languages. They put their ideas and concepts into a play, but they also expect the audience to find their own meanings. Of course, they hope that some people in the audience will share their vision, but often they are not aiming at one specific message.

RTE: What can you tell us about scenography?

TATIANA: The European understanding is that scenography is conceptual thinking about environment—anything that needs a special environment including theatre, museum installations, site-specific performances, and events. This not only includes the physical set design, but also lighting, sound, movement, costumes. It deals with everything except the script itself.

RTE: Where did you finally study?

TATIANA: At the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London where I did a Master's Degree in scenography. It was a full-year program, from October to October, which I chose because of the school's reputation and because of the creativity of the actors, playwrights, and scenographers who have graduated from there. I was encouraged to take this course by an Orthodox priest, a nun, and an American friend in Moscow, and I received huge support there

when I needed it. The program was what I'd hoped for—changing how you see things and how you deal with environment, space and interiors.

RTE: Who might we know from the Royal Central School?

TATIANA: Of the older generation: Sir Laurence Olivier, Dame Judi Dench, Julie Christie, Vanessa and Lynn Redgrave, as well as the British playwright Howard Pinter. Newer stars include Martin Freeman who played Bilbo Baggins in *The Hobbit* and Dr. Watson for the BBC *Sherlock*, as well as *Dr. Who's* Chris Eccleston. There are many more, of course.

RTE: Did the European students have as great a change in perspective as your own?

TATIANA: In this specific course, I think that everyone changed. We were all quite lost at times and didn't know what to do. It felt as if the earth had been kicked out from under our feet. The year was extremely demanding physically, intellectually and emotionally, but I'm very pleased that I did the course. One of the biggest challenges was collaborating on creative projects with other students, where you had to find ways to make your joint project work. Our final projects were individual papers and exhibition pieces for which I explored philosophical and scenographic elements related to the condition of autism as an example of "otherness." Looking from outside, the nature of autistic otherness lies either in a reduced ability or complete inability to begin or maintain a dialogue, and I experimented with how autistic perception might be translated spatially, how to communicate the autistic experience, and how this otherness might be presented. To do this I merged spaces and surfaces with projection, glass, reflection and re-reflection to create illusions based on reality, to give a sense of how a person with autism might perceive the world.

RTE: And you've submitted a proposal to do Ph.D. work along these lines?

TATIANA: Yes, the topic is much too broad to be explored within a Master's Thesis, so it was suggested that I consider Ph.D. studies.

RTE: What was your experience of the Royal Central School instructors?

TATIANA: Most of my tutors were amazing—incredibly helpful, and gave everything they had to their students. They encouraged, and at the same

time pushed you hard to use your talents and think things out thoroughly. They weren't gentle, but were absolutely marvelous at pulling the best out of you. They guided without imposition. You often felt like an idiot, but in the end you knew you'd really gotten somewhere.

Scenography at the Bolshoi

RTE: When you returned to Moscow you were hired to work in the scenography department of the Bolshoi Theatre where you are now engaged in joint projects with the Monte Carlo Ballet, and the London theatre company Cheek by Jowl. What is it like working at the Bolshoi? Even the name has a dream-like quality.

TATIANA: Although it sounds romantic because it is about creating beauty, the Bolshoi is a busy musical theatre performing ballet and opera. The work can seem very chaotic because each project has to start from scratch, even if they've put on the same ballet dozens of times before. A new director or choreographer will always do something original, and our job is to make that work.

RTE: Even classical pieces are being presented in new ways?

TATIANA: Yes, although you can still see very classical stagings at the Bolshoi; classical in set and choreography. Presently, however, we are doing Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* with the Monte Carlo Ballet. While we are using the original plot, Jean-Christophe Maillot, the director/choreographer of this production, has scenes set both in the original period and in a contemporary style. For the musical score, Maillot assembled a montage of pieces from Shostakovich. The set is minimalistic and although it looks very simple, it is actually quite complicated in its technical construction.

RTE: What will Cheek by Jowl be doing?

TATIANA: *Hamlet* in a modern version, done as a ballet. When Cheek by Jowl works in drama theatre, they usually preserve the original texts, but radically change the environment with visually interesting and unexpected accents and contemporary meanings to things you wouldn't notice in a classical period play. They also feature different kinds of pop/rock music in the play. For instance, they may sing part of a Shakespeare play in cabaret.

Of course, there is very little music in Shakespeare's plays, but they may add it in. It's well done and I think they are very good.

RTE: When most of us think of opera and ballet, we think of talented yet sensitive artists and dancers. Is it a generalization that these world-class performers are unpredictable?

TATIANA: Every personality is here, and of course, there are complicated relationships, but how you deal with it is your own choice. Either you enter into the theatrical dramas, the quarrels, and the intrigues, or you just do your job and along the way find interesting people and creative things to do. People in the arts are often unpredictable, change their minds, or ask for something that is technically impossible. Sometimes they have incredible and beautiful ideas. When you know that a person is almost a genius, you try to follow their ideas; and sometimes you also need to help them gently step down to earth to see what is really possible.

From Classical to Contemporary Theatre

RTE: Can you talk about the purpose of theatre in general, and how that fits into a Christian worldview? If you are trying to be a free, faithful, noble, and charitable person, how would watching someone else's life on stage affect you? Of course, we watch each other constantly—our family, friends, co-workers and neighbors, even if we are in a skete on Mt. Athos—so perhaps, theatre isn't terribly different.

TATIANA: First of all I think that whether it's Christian or not, for me the most amazing thing about theatre is its incredible ability to kick the earth from under your feet and to show ordinary things in a completely different way. Here we come to the idea of affect, because theatre can work on various levels. For example, in architecture, what we think of as a traditional *proscenium* theatre, with a stage at one end that the viewer looks at like a picture, hasn't been around very long. Until the mid-19th century, theatres used to have lights on during the performances. It was the composer Richard Wagner who first turned the lights off in the auditorium and left only the stage lit to allow the audience to concentrate. Now, when people say, "We don't like this experimental theatre, we like traditional theatre," this "tradition" actually has a rather short history.

RTE: And before electricity plays were either performed in daylight, or if at night, torchlit.

TATIANA: Yes, that's exactly what was done, so with Wagner it was quite a technological breakthrough to focus the audience's attention on what was happening on stage. Wagner also removed the orchestra from the stage and from the audience's view, putting it into the orchestra pit. These changes were not that long ago.

As for the purpose of theatre, even this kind of traditional theatre had the effect of pulling people from everyday life. When we are in an atmosphere that is very different from what we see and feel most of the time, we begin to

TATIANA: Yes, of course, and the idea of catharsis—releasing, purging, and purifying the emotions and personality—has always been a part of theatre from the time of the classical Greek tragedies. It is taking the protagonist, the leading character, through hardships and difficult situations in order to purify his personality so that he can become better, stronger, and understand life in a deeper way.

RTE: That fits Jonathan Shay's explanation of *The Iliad* as the classical Greek attempt to treat trauma in returning warriors. Veterans would listen together to the recitation of this long poetic story on the tragedy of war, and would start on the path to healing through their own empathy and the empa-

The most amazing thing about theatre is its incredible ability to kick the earth from under your feet and to show ordinary things in a completely different way.

think of things in new ways. With the architectural experimentation of the Black Box or White Cube theatres in the late 19th and early 20th century, new ways were developed to influence the audience's perception: audio, visual, kinesthetic. Philosopher Elizabeth Grosz says that art can produce good ideas, but only indirectly. Its fundamental goal is to produce sensations, and if they are complicated enough, interesting enough, surprising enough, then they generate thought. It allows us to think new thoughts and feel new feelings. For me this is one of the main purposes of theatre.

RTE: I first encountered this idea of sensation leading to thought when I realized that there were Orthodox terms that we don't have in English, such as the Greek *nous*, which is much deeper than a common English translation as "mind," or *amartyros*, as "one who misses the mark" rather than the English "sin." I'd had the interior experience of these things, but lacked the language to express it. This also true with music, and it must occur in theatre as well.

thy of those listening with them. Perhaps this is also why people have been attracted to the lives of saints, where a saint is confronted with the same troubles, passions, and worldly temptations that we all have.

TATIANA: Yes, it's always about both the character in the play and about the audience. The audience should somehow engage with what's happening with the character and feel that catharsis themselves. This has been the reason for theatre from the beginning. Of course, much has changed. For example, for a contemporary audience it wouldn't be exciting to have a chorus onstage stating the morality of the play directly, as in *Medea*, where the chorus sings, "Thoughtless lady, why long for death's marriage bed which human beings all shun?/ Death comes soon enough and brings an end to everything. You should not pray for it."



RTE: Do you think we've become so much more self-reflective after centuries of literature and theatre-going, that the moral now seems obvious?

TATIANA: Art has certainly changed in response to life and philosophy, yet everything is connected. Even as art spirals into new forms, the old questions remain at the center. The mysteries of life, of death, of love, of meaning, are quite similar now to what was being explored five thousand years ago in philosophy and the arts, but the approaches are different.

RTE: Unlike classical audiences, who only saw plays intermittently, do you think we are less open to catharsis because we are constantly bombarded with tragedy through books, television, theatre, and daily newscasts?

TATIANA: Yes, somehow we are desensitized. What we read and watch on television affects what we see and how we respond. Everything is connected and we are kind of running in circles.

Catharsis and Individuality

TATIANA: In the scenography course I did a project comparing classical Greek tragedy and contemporary theatre. I looked at catharsis not so much as purification or making someone "better," but as a fundamental change to his outlook on life, and there have been some significant historical shifts in how this happened on stage. According to Aristotle, tragedy's leading characters are powerful people, often with a very high social status, whereas our contemporary tragedy features ordinary people in their ordinary environments. The overwhelming power of the Greek gods is now replaced by the pressure of society. In both cases there is pressure, but nowadays it is more likely to be a neighbor or relation. The classical chorus, which expounded the morality of the play, is now replaced by the character's conscience. It's now up to the character to decide for himself; he's not warned by the chorus, "Oh no, don't do that!" Instead of a rigid outer structure we now face personal choices and responsibilities.

Kierkegaard, the Christian religious thinker, says that in classical tragedy an individual acts within a freedom bound by ties of state, family, and fate, and that the ultimate fate of the hero is not only the consequence of his actions, but of an inevitable outside force that affects him. In contemporary tragedy, the character acts upon his own life, and his decisions are

often based on reflective introspection. It usually addresses his personal experience rather than his place in society. Our attention has turned to the personality. Pierre Klossowski commented on this idea of Kierkegaard's—in ancient Greece there was no cult of individuality; personality was only precious as part of the collective.

RTE: As in some non-Western societies today?

TATIANA: Yes, or under communist or socialist societies. In traditional tragedy the choice to ignore or doubt what was right or wrong was impossible. These acts were strictly predetermined. In contemporary tragedy the hero has the ability to destroy or save himself or others by choosing what he thinks acceptable or not, according to his subjective ethical viewpoint.

Also, classical tragedy aimed at affecting the audience as the public whole, while contemporary tragedy tries to reach each person as an individual. There is a very strong but true saying by British playwright Howard Barker, "In a tragedy the audience is disunited. It sits alone. It suffers alone. In the endless drizzle of false collectivity, tragedy restores pain to the individual." Though there is a collective of people watching, it is very much about individual perception. Not only the individuality of the characters, but also the individuality of each person in the audience.

From the very beginning in Greece, theatre was a strong and powerful tool, often used politically to create or change the social climate. Now, of course, it also sometimes aims at changing social conventions—but in a very different way because it does not call on people as a collective, but turns toward each person individually. To put it very generally, modern theatre is very much about individuality in every possible sense.

RTE: Do you think that the theatrical and literary emphasis on individuality has helped foster the loneliness that many people experience?

TATIANA: We might say so, but we could also say that when people began to realize they were lonely, then it started showing up in works of art. So, it's always a little of both, and it's hard to say which came first. This is a huge discussion: do people affect how the media functions, or is it the media that affects people and changes their way of thinking?

RTE: In the medieval West, did plays conform more or less to the collective classical Greek model or was there already a shift towards individuality?

TATIANA: There was a shift already and we can see this in Shakespeare's tragedies. We definitely don't see a chorus or any straightforward single idea of morality in his plays. The morals are still quite obvious and reflect many traditional Christian values, but there is already ambiguity, which increases in the following centuries.

RTE: In some eras the audience response has been dramatic. I've heard that when opera first came to Moscow and St. Petersburg in the late 18th and 19th centuries, there were horse-drawn ambulances at the door of the theatre because people would become so caught up in the play that some would have heart attacks.

TATIANA: The ambulances outside the Russian theatre were not only about people being overly excited about the plot, but about this new combination

Even when a traditional play is staged with period sets, music, and costumes, it's still a new piece every time. How it will arrive from the previous stagings depends not only on the actors, but on the audience. That is the amazing thing about theatre for me. And everything that has happened in society, whether you intend it to or not, is reflected on the contemporary stage.

RTE: Yet good actors seem to work at taking on the mindset of an era, as well as getting the outward details right. The actors of *Downton Abbey*, for example, do the early 20th century very well, partly because it's still within living memory.

TATIANA: Although, even if we were able to perform a classical Greek tragedy in one of the ancient theatres, completely true to the original, the modern audience would see something very different than an ancient Greek audi-



Art's fundamental goal is to produce sensations, and if they are complicated enough, interesting enough, surprising enough, then they generate thought.

of audio and visual experiences. Everything brought together at once—story, music, costumes, sets, was just overwhelming. People just couldn't bear it. Theatre has always combined many different mediums, but now more than ever. It is very natural now for us to have music, dancing, orchestra, and film projection all brought together, but in the 19th and early 20th century, it was a breakthrough.

As for motivation, it's individual. Even in the same piece, one person may only see an evening's fascinating story, while someone else may come hoping for inspiration or to get some answers for questions. The audience response is a performance in itself. If you watch an audience in a theatre, it's amazing.

As philosophy and religion changed, it was reflected in all of the arts, but there has always been something special about theatre's live performance.

ence saw. Theatre reflects both the original script and setting, *and everything that has happened in the generations since*, including problems that did not exist before.

Our society is so intense that theatre needs to give a stronger impression than everyday life, and can do this by moving towards emptiness and silence (to which we are now less accustomed) or to more extreme light and sound. Obviously, people don't faint anymore when they see a train coming from the screen.

Comedy, Context, and Post-Modernism

RTE: You've talked about tragedy. Has comedy changed as well?

TATIANA: I haven't looked as deeply into comedy, but at school we did discuss laughter and what is funny. The main points are very similar, oddly enough. Again, everything has shifted from collective to personal and this plays out in comedies as well as tragedies. In the classical tradition you were also guided to laugh at what was funny.

RTE: How would you describe the difference between theatre and television?

TATIANA: The main difference is that theatre is always alive. Television is not yet that interactive. In television you often get a series of episodes with the same characters, with action happening in the same time frame as it would in real life, whereas in theatre, the intensity and speed of action is generally very compressed.

RTE: And because television is on film, you can watch the same thing over and over, whereas a theatre performance only happens once?

TATIANA: Yes, it's like that Japanese proverb, "You can never enter the same river twice." Although a TV series is on film, the person who watches it is always changing, so in this sense it can be different every time, but in theatre it's a matter of both the audience and the actors constantly changing.

RTE: At the beginning of the interview you mentioned *Jeeves and Wooster*, the TV version of P.G. Wodehouse's stories about Bertie Wooster, an early 20th-century Englishman (played by Hugh Laurie) and his butler, Jeeves (Stephen Fry), which is full of historical detail and so good-humored that even the villains are just mistaken and often redeemed. Then we have the more recent series that first interested you in scenography—*House*, again with Hugh Laurie playing a brilliant yet cynical doctor with complex plots that are very modern in their presentation. And the audiences are as diverse. Although I find the simplicity of Wodehouse artful and extremely funny, I know a seventeen-year-old who prefers *House* and *Sherlock* for their sophistication.

TATIANA: We've come again to those spiraling returns in our lives. I can very easily imagine someone quite young not quite appreciating Wodehouse. As for this teenager's experience, isn't there always a bit of early sophistication

brought on by a desire to see with a more adult perception? Post-modernism has penetrated more deeply, and affects us much earlier. Young people are enjoying these layers.

RTE: How does post-modernism play out?

TATIANA: One of the main qualities of a post-modern work of art is this multi-layeredness, with lots of indirect references and allusions referring either to a social event, another piece of literature, or another artwork that is not mentioned directly. But people who've read or seen those pieces will recognize the hints.

RTE: Like using proverbs or literary phrases in daily speech: "An eye for an eye...?"

TATIANA: Yes, and some people have no clue about where that comes from, what it means, or the assumptions underlying the use of it, and so they lose the richness of the context. To perceive and understand the entire context that the author is bringing to his work, you need to know those references. And it is not only about the author who brings those meanings and subtexts into his work, but it is also about the audience who is reading or watching his work. It's said that in postmodern works of art audiences become creators of their own pieces; they bring all of their own meanings to what they are watching and reading.

RTE: But if the audience doesn't grasp the author's intent, can there be any real response?

TATIANA: It's the audience's right to claim their own truth, but this is not necessarily an objective truth. I would say that if an author is committed to giving a very specific message, then it's very much about his craftsmanship, how sophisticated he is in delivering that meaning to the audience in the way he wants them to understand it. If he is successful, everyone will still read it somewhat differently, but his point will get through. On the audience's side there has to be a certain objectivity and reasonableness if we want to see what was intended. Knowing the context of when and where the author lived, what he believed and what influenced him, is important.

RTE: Then what would you say is the heart of a comedy like *Jeeves and Wooster*? And how would that compare to the post-modern *House*?

TATIANA: Bertie Wooster, of course, is compassionate to his friends and enemies. Ungentlemanly, ignoble behavior is absolutely not part of his nature. He can be a bit silly, or lazy, or naïve, but he is always noble and always a gentleman. There is no meanness in what he does.

RTE: Substance behind the silliness?

TATIANA: Yes, he's neither shallow nor completely silly. There is a purity that he has chosen. Aside from P.G. Wodehouse's amazing humor, what is absolutely startling for me about this epoch is this purity. Though there is a lot of sophistication in thinking and freedom in behavior, there's a consciously nurtured innocence as well.

House, of course, is completely different. There Hugh Laurie plays a crippled, drug-addicted doctor, damaged in early life, who has a very complicated relationship with himself and with everyone around him; yet he's a genius and he heals people. What could be more intriguing than this combination? He can appear rude and vulgar, but again, underneath these flaws lies nobility. I saw him as one of the last Don Quixotes and this is a link between Laurie's characterization of Dr. House and of Bertie Wooster. Underneath this antagonistic, grumpy nature, Dr. House doesn't dictate to people, but tries to open their eyes to what is happening, though the truth might be difficult. It's never about hurting people because he enjoys it. And again, the amazing humor, which is absolutely different from Bertie's humor. It's very metaphorical and his scripted sayings have become "Houseisms". They're brilliant in their depth.

Also, David Shore, the creator of *House*, was fascinated by Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes from his teenage years. He knew that the original character of Sherlock Holmes was based on a real physician: Dr. Joseph Bell, an Edinburgh surgeon under whom Doyle served as a clerk. In turn, Shore took Sherlock Holmes as a prototype for Dr. House, who, like Holmes and Bell, has an amazing ability to notice small details and facts that connect otherwise inexplicable events. Both Holmes and House are drug addicts, and House, like Holmes' Dr. Watson, has a limp. Also, music carries them away, and they both play to help them think. Holmes plays the violin and House plays the piano and guitar, and both their music and their thoughts are complex, fertile, and creative. Another similarity in their characters is that they don't appear to be very interested in helping people. Sherlock is interested

in solving detective cases and House in solving medical mysteries. In fact House says, "We are not here to cure patients, we are here to cure diseases."

RTE: In the new *Sherlock*, you also see these tendencies.

TATIANA: Yes, and this somehow brings us back to where we started. Although Dr. House may appear not at all pleasant, and even caustic with his killing irony, he is able to heal his patients, as, in the end, Sherlock helps his troubled clients. Sometimes it's not about physical healing, but about changing a person emotionally or mentally, and Dr. House's patients are allowed to die without heroic and extravagant medical measures when he sees that they've made the fundamental change they needed and don't want to linger. It's not so much about healing as about changing. For me, *House* seems almost universal; for any situation I can find something there to use as a lens to see my way through. I don't try to think about this, it just comes up.

RTE: Would *Jeeves and Wooster* bring about the same kind of catharsis?

TATIANA: *Jeeves and Wooster* isn't catharsis in the classical sense, which always comes through tragedy, but it can be quite healing, because when we open up to that kind of purity it will shed some light in our life and show a different and beautiful side of things. Bertie can be silly and naïve, but he's not stupid. He chooses to be the way he is, and not to violate his own code of what it is to be a gentleman, and this is absolutely amazing. It's brilliant. ✦