

Politics and Putinism: A Critical Examination of New Russian Drama

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Declaration of Authorship

I James Rowson hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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Abstract

This thesis will contextualise and critically explore how New Drama (*Novaya Drama*) has been shaped by and adapted to the political, social, and cultural landscape under Putinism (from 2000). It draws on close analysis of a variety of plays written by a burgeoning collection of playwrights from across Russia, examining how this provocative and political artistic movement has emerged as one of the most vehement critics of the Putin regime. This study argues that the manifold New Drama repertoire addresses key facets of Putinism by performing suppressed and marginalised voices in public arenas. It contends that New Drama has challenged the established, normative discourses of Putinism presented in the Russian media and by Putin himself, and demonstrates how these productions have situated themselves in the context of the nascent opposition movement in Russia. By doing so, this thesis will offer a fresh perspective on how New Drama's precarious engagement with Putinism provokes political debate in contemporary Russia, and challenges audience members to consider their own role in Putin's autocracy.

The first chapter surveys the theatrical and political landscape in Russia at the turn of the millennium, focusing on the political and historical contexts of New Drama in Russian theatre and culture. The final four chapters focus on specific case studies. Chapter Two explores the development of political satire by contrasting Varvara Faer's *BerlusPutin* (2012) and Viktor Teterin's *Putin.doc* (2005). Chapter Three looks at Mikhail and Vyacheslav Durnenkov's *The Drunks* (*Pianii*, 2009) and Pavel Pryzhko's *The Soldier* (*Soldat*, 2011). Chapter Four discusses two plays by Vasily Sigarev: *Plasticine* (*Plastilin*, 2000) and *Black Milk* (*Chernoie Moloko*, 2001). Chapter Five explores the documentary plays *The Bolotnaya Square Case* (*Bolotnoe Delo*, 2015) by Polina Borodina and Elena Gremina's *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* (*Chas Vosemnadtsat'*, 2010, expanded in 2012).

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Introduction

This thesis critically explores how New Drama (*Novaya Drama*) has been shaped by and adapted to the political, social, and cultural landscape under Putinism (from 2000). Since the turn of the millennium, young playwrights have engaged with the political and social realities of contemporary Russia, playing a key role in articulating an oppositional discourse to the Putin regime. The work of these provocative theatre makers has been collated under the idiom of New Drama, a broad term that includes plays written and performed throughout the twenty-first century that interrogate contemporary cultural identities and articulate important political anxieties that have emerged in Russian society under the Putin regime.

The emergence of New Drama at the start of the twenty-first century was the result of a variety of disparate factors and circumstances. These included, but were not limited to, the auspices of the Royal Court Theatre's international programme for young playwrights in Russia, the foundation of theatre spaces dedicated to new theatre writing in both Moscow and the provinces, and the creation of a number of dedicated playwriting courses in universities across the country. The focal point of New Drama is a cluster of small theatres located in central Moscow, which are dedicated to producing new writing. The limited performance spaces and capacities of these theatres has become a signature of New Drama productions. As Marina Davydova, editor of leading Russian-language theatre journal *Teatr*, asserts: 'we can imagine the plays of these young authors only in the cellar of "Teatr.doc" or another small and underground room.'¹ Teatr.doc, founded in February 2002 by Mikhail Ugarov and Elena Gremina, has emerged as an important locus of politically and socially engaged theatre in contemporary Russia. Significantly, the company is run independently of the state and without government funding – a rarity in Russia, where historically most theatres are publically funded institutions. Instead, Teatr.doc rely on private donations, online crowdfunding campaigns, the help of volunteers, and often the financial support of the artists themselves, who use their own money to keep the theatre afloat. In recent years, Teatr.doc has made headlines across the globe following the company's forced eviction from its original space on Trekhprudnyi Pereulok in the Tverskoy district of central Moscow in December 2014, and again

¹ Davydova (2009)

from their new premises on Spartakovskaia Ulitsa in June 2015.² Despite the significant setbacks faced by the company, Teatr.doc has continued to stage its diverse repertoire in Moscow and remains one of the focal points of New Drama.

This thesis argues that New Drama has emerged as one of the most exciting opposition movements against the increasing authoritarianism of the Kremlin. It demonstrates that contemporary playwriting has engaged with suppressed and marginalised discourses in public arenas. It focuses on four crucial facets of Putinism, which I identify as key political anxieties in Russia: Putin the politician; the legacy of the Second Chechen War; social divide; and the Kremlin's manipulation of the legal system in a series of high profile trials. By considering the development of new playwriting alongside the political context of the Putin administration, this thesis demonstrates a fresh perspective on how New Drama's precarious engagement with Putinism provokes political debate in contemporary Russia, and challenges audience members to consider their own role in Putin's autocracy.

This introductory chapter provides the context for the thesis. It includes a review of previous academic and critical work on contemporary Russian theatre and Putinism, and identifies how this thesis will situate itself in the field of study. It introduces and defines the key terms relating to New Drama and Putinism, which are utilised in my thesis. Finally, the methodological approaches used in carrying out this research will be explained. I begin, however, by setting out and defining my research question and aims.

Research Questions and Aims

This thesis identifies and examines the development of New Drama, and the movement's relationship with the social and political context of the Putin era. In particular, this study considers how contemporary theatre makers have employed disparate theatrical modes to challenge the increasing authoritarianism of the Kremlin and provided alternative narratives to the official state discourse. Focusing on new plays produced in the period 2000-2015, this thesis asks whether New Drama has been able to create a new form of social and political engagement in Russian theatre. What is the role of new theatre writing in Putin's Russia? What role have these theatre

² For example, writing for the BBC in 2015, Lucy Ash described Teatr.doc as being 'Russia's most daring theatre company.' Ash (2015).

makers played in facilitating the enlivening of political debate and the formation of new values that challenge the ideology of Putinism?

In examining the relationship between Putinism and contemporary Russian playwriting, ‘Politics and Putinism: A Critical Examination of New Russian Drama’ traces the development of one of the most exciting and original theatrical movements in the twenty-first century: New Drama. In doing so, it offers analysis of theatre makers whose powerful productions have yet to be explored in English-language scholarship. There are four correlative and primary aims of this thesis. The first is to contextualise New Drama in relation to the politics of Putinism through in depth analysis of the case studies. Secondly, it asks how theatre makers have challenged the normative discourse of the Putin regime and staged key political anxieties articulated and identified by scholars and Russian commentators. Thirdly, it investigates how New Drama engages with the nascent opposition movement in Russia. Lastly, in a world that is increasingly reliant on the Internet and social media to articulate contemporary social anxieties, this thesis considers how Russian artists foreground the inclusion of those marginalised by the Putin regime, and provoke and enliven political debate in the public sphere, challenging audience members to consider their own role in Putin’s autocracy.

Key Theatrical Terms and Definitions

The title of this thesis makes explicit reference to the term ‘New Drama’. The New Drama idiom has been used throughout the twenty-first century to describe new theatre writing in Russia. Originally applied by theatre practitioners eager to brand and promote the boom in new theatre writing that occurred at the turn of the millennium, it was seized upon by theatre critics and journalists who viewed this new cultural phenomenon as an exciting and controversial development in Russian theatre. New Drama emerged as a playwright-led development in theatre that privileged the writer in the creative process. At the turn of the millennium, a number of writers including Mikhail Ugarov, Elena Gremina, Nikolai Koliada, and Alexei Kazantsev founded their own independent theatres and started directing their own work. As Ugarov explicitly foregrounds in the *New Drama Manifesto*, the ‘rejection of contemporary authors by the theatre’ has served as a provocation for the movement.³

³ Ugarov (2004).

The genealogy of New Drama is contended, but the revivification of playwriting in the 2000s is linked to a variety of disparate catalysts. In 1999 and 2000, the Royal Court Theatre's International Department staged a series of workshops in Moscow prompted by Russian theatre makers' fascination with the 'In-Yer-Face' theatre of British dramatists including Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane, and Anthony Neilson. Developed in the 1990s, 'In-Yer-Face' provoked its audience to re-consider their perception of what could be spoken about and presented on stage through the playwrights' subversive use of language and violence.⁴ The Royal Court's seminars introduced of the practice of verbatim theatre, which was a significant moment in the development of New Drama. As shall be discussed in Chapter One, the influence of British theatre on New Drama is contested, but for some Russian artists and cultural critics it belongs 'outside the Russian tradition.'⁵ The founding of Moscow-based theatre Teatr.doc is another key moment in the evolution of the movement. In recent years, Teatr.doc has staged a series of provocative political productions, and remains the only independent theatre in Russia dedicated to producing new writing.

New Drama is used as an umbrella term to describe manifold theatrical genres and forms. Writers rarely concentrate on one specific genre, often shifting between producing documentary theatre, comic satire, and plays with more experimental theatrical structures. However, the extensive canon of New Drama is united by its examination of diurnal experience and the articulation of counter-narratives of individuals and communities that have been excluded and marginalised from the discourse of Putinism.⁶ In particular, writers employ the use of quotidian language and the inclusion of strong, obscene profanities, known as *mat* in Russian. *Mat* was a phenomenon that appeared in Russian literature during Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of *perestroika* in the 1980s as a means of challenging and subverting the linguistic constraints of official Soviet discourse and is defined by Russian literary scholar Eliot Borenstein as 'forbidden words describing the human anatomy, sexual activity, and

⁴ 'In-Yer-Face' Theatre was the appellation first used by theatre critic Aleks Sierz to describe a new generation of young British playwrights who emerged in the 1990s. For more information on the plays and playwrights at the centre of 'In-Yer-Face' see Sierz's book *In-yer-face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2000).

⁵ Bogaev in Freedman (2006) 19.

⁶ In this thesis I use the term 'counter-narratives' as defined by political theorist Molly Andrews as 'the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives' Andrews (2004) 1.

the rest of the physiological functions that Bakhtin so eloquently ascribes to the “lower bodily stratum”.⁷

The focus on language, however, presents problems in defining New Drama. In the 2010s, the collaborations between theatre practitioners Pavel Pryazhko and Dmitrii Volkostrelov redefined the parameters of New Drama, playing with ideas of structure and form. Pryazhko’s play *The Soldier (Soldat, 2011)*, which is a case study in Chapter Three, takes the form of fifteen minutes of silent, everyday actions performed by a single actor with only one line of text spoken at the end. Pryazhko asserts that New Drama can take varied theatrical forms and is defined by its consideration of the ‘everyday individual experience. The language and structure of the text can take any form you want. It’s not about them.’⁸ The productions of Pryazhko and Volkostrelov are examples that highlight how New Drama does not always depend on the presence of a theatrical text for its exploration of Russian society and politics. Although the parameters of the idiom have widened since the early 2000s, New Drama continues to interrogate contemporary political developments and asks its audience to think about their own role in civil society. In this thesis, therefore, the term New Drama is used to describe a canon of productions defined by their critical engagement with Russian politics and society.

Literature Review

As of writing, the only full-length book published on Russian playwriting in the twenty-first century is Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky’s 2009 study *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama*. This publication examines many of the playwrights that contributed to the explosion of new theatre at the turn of the millennium. In this work Beumers and Lipovetsky offer a detailed exploration of the phenomenon, arguing that the plays produced by Russian writers in the 2000s rendered ‘violence or trauma through language, through the interaction between characters, and through the organisation of theatrical performance’.⁹ *Performing Violence* contextualises New Drama within the framework of violence in Soviet and post-Soviet culture analysing how playwrights have articulated cultural and linguistic developments in modern Russia. By focusing on the

⁷ Borenstein (2008) 58.

⁸ Pryazhko (2011a).

⁹ Beumers and Lipovetsky (2009) 301.

intersection between New Drama and brutality and violence in post-Soviet society, the study makes important insights into the developments of new play writing and the ‘need to test new forms of social communication’.¹⁰

Alongside *Performing Violence*, a number of academic articles have been published that trace and contextualise the rise of New Drama. Moscow-based theatre critic John Freedman’s article ‘Contemporary Russian Drama: The Journey from Stagnation to a Golden Age’ provides a summary of the evolution of New Drama, charting its evolution from the Liubimovka New Play Festival in the 1990s until 2010. Freedman’s study examines New Drama geographically, between the cities of Moscow, Yekaterinburg, and Togliatti. By doing so, Freedman asserts the significance of the provinces - alongside the capital city - in the development of the movement. In his article, Freedman further observes the extensive parameters that define New Drama as applicable ‘to almost any new play challenging the theatrical establishment by way of language, form, or content.’¹¹ A second article that provides an important overview of New Drama is ‘Russia’s New Drama: From Togliatti to Moscow’ by scholar and theatre director, Yana Ross. Similarly to Freedman, Ross offers an account of twenty-first century playwriting based on the geographical locations of the primary protagonists. Ross explores the emergence of New Drama from the plays of Nikolai Kolyada in the 1990s and his influence on the subsequent generations of Yekaterinburg writers who attended his playwriting course at the Yekaterinburg State Theatre Institute.¹² Ross’s article situates the emergence of New Drama in the historical context of Russian theatre. Ross argues that in the Russian theatre tradition: ‘fostering dialogue between playwrights and director has never been a priority in formal training programs, whose focus on old masters such as Shakespeare and Chekhov forms the basis for directing student’s vocabulary.’¹³ By making these observations, Ross offers important insights into the complex cultural background of New Drama, asserting that the movement has emerged as a reaction to the diminution of the creative role of playwrights in the 1990s.

Moscow-based theatre critics have produced the majority of other written work on New Drama. In particular, the output of Pavel Rudnev, Marina Davydova,

¹⁰ Ibid. 135.

¹¹ Freedman (2010a) 408.

¹² Two of the writers considered in depth in this thesis, Vassily Sigarev and Polina Borodina, are graduates of Kolyada’s course.

¹³ Ross (2006) 31.

Daniil Dondurei, and Elena Kovalskaya is referenced throughout this thesis. These writers primarily produce articles for Russian-language newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals. In 2004, the journal *Iskusstvo Kino* published an edition dedicated to New Drama, which includes sections by Davydova and Dondurei as well as interviews and articles written by prominent figures in New Drama including two of the co-founders of Teatr.doc, Elena Gremina and Ivan Vyrypaev.

Further contributions to scholarship on twenty-first century Russian playwriting specifically attest to the development of documentary theatre and use of verbatim techniques by theatre makers. In their article ‘Reality Performance: Documentary Trends in Post-Soviet Russian Theatre’, Beumers and Lipovetsky analyse Russian documentary theatre in the artistic and social contexts of post-Soviet Russia. The study is concerned with the idea of the ‘other’ in modern Russian society, whom Beumers and Lipovetsky define as ‘perceived as potentially dangerous, as a source of violence’¹⁴ The article provides a historical context for the rise of documentary theatre, foregrounding the influence of British theatre practitioners who staged workshops on the verbatim technique in Russia in 2000. Additionally, Beumers and Lipovetsky contextualise Russian documentary theatre within global trends in western culture that emphasize ‘authentic’ artistic experience, including Danish ‘Dogma’ and Michael Moore’s documentary film *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004).¹⁵ In April 2015 Russian-language journal *Teatr* published an edition dedicated to documentary theatre practice entitled ‘Dokumental'naya Traditsiya v Teatr i v Iskusstve’ (The Documentary Tradition in Theatre and Art), which included a variety of scholarly articles as well as contributions from leading New Drama playwrights Maxim Kurochkin, Alexander Rodionov, and Mikhail Kaluzhsky.

The only full-length study of Russian documentary theatre in the twenty-first century is Molly Flynn’s unpublished thesis *Documentary Theatre in Twenty-First Century Russia: teatr, v kotorom ne igrayut*. Flynn’s study asserts that Russian documentary theatre practice ‘addresses important contradictions imbedded in the daily life of contemporary Russia’.¹⁶ Her thesis details how documentary theatre makers have addressed anxieties surrounding the nature of documents in contemporary Russia, creating theatrical interrogations of history, memory, and

¹⁴ Beumers and Lipovetsky (2008) 301.

¹⁵ Ibid. 294.

¹⁶ Flynn (2015) 176.

national identity.

This varied output of scholarly and critical literature on playwriting in the twenty-first century reflects the diverse range of theatrical works in the New Drama repertoire. It critically examines how playwrights have engaged with post-Soviet society and demonstrates the importance of new writing in the development of Russian theatre practice. As Beumers and Lipovetsky write: '[New Drama] has proven the need for a new stage language and for new plays, whether they are Russian or foreign. Thus, New Drama has placed Russian plays onto the theatrical map both home and abroad'.¹⁷ In other words, New Drama has revived the role of the playwright in Russia and helped underscore the country's dynamic theatrical traditions.

As discussed here, a range of important scholarly and journalistic writing has examined New Drama in the social and political context of the Putin years. While both Flynn, and Beumers and Lipovetsky's writings, consider documentary theatre practice in the context of the social and political setting of the 2000s and 2010s, they do not explicitly articulate their findings within the framework of Putinism and an oppositional discourse. Although these works are invaluable in furthering the understanding of contemporary Russian theatre, to date no study has examined New Drama within the explicit political context of the Putin regime and its policies. By considering the case studies within the framework of four key facets of Putinism, this thesis demonstrates how playwrights in Russia have directly interrogated the normative discourse of the Kremlin, providing vital oppositional narratives to those that saturate the state-controlled media.

Research Methodology

In my exploration of New Drama, I employ a variety of approaches to address my research questions and aims. Through both close textual readings and detailed analysis of the performances, this study focuses on both the linguistic aspects of New Drama, but also the important implications of each production's staging. In this way, I question how New Drama is able to provoke its audience into a wider dialogue about their own engagement with contemporary Russian politics. Through contextual analysis that draws on wider scholarship from political theory and Slavonic studies, I

¹⁷ Beumers and Lipovetsky (2009) 33.

situate New Drama within the political and historical contexts. Furthermore, my use of contemporary theatre scholarship provides an important dialogue for how New Drama is positioned in the Russian theatre tradition and global theatre practices in the twenty-first century.

My case studies were selected for a number of reasons. Firstly, I chose a number of productions still running in repertoire in Russia, as I was able to attend performances of these productions. Secondly, I have attempted to cover productions staged throughout the development of Putinism. Therefore I include Vassily Sigarev's play *Plasticine* (*Plastilin*, 2000), which was first professionally staged in 2001, and *The Bolotnaya Square Case* (*Bolotnoe Delo*, 2015) by Polina Borodina, which was produced in 2015. Finally, I have attempted to select writers who are still producing New Drama plays and remain involved in the promotion of new theatre writing in Russia.

This study draws on fieldwork I conducted in Moscow and St Petersburg that consisted of attending theatre productions, conducting interviews, and engaging in archival work. I chose to focus my fieldwork primarily on Moscow for the following reasons. Firstly, a key part of my research in Russia took the form of attending as many live performances as possible. My aim was to inform my analysis of selected productions by observing them live in their original performance spaces. The majority of the case studies analysed in depth in this chapter are performed in repertoire at theatres in central Moscow. By attending these performances, not only was I able to strengthen my analysis of the productions, but I was also able to immerse myself in the working practices of the theatres and observe and participate in the post-show discussions that occur after many New Drama shows. Furthermore, by attending the productions I was able to engage in informal conversation with both audience members and staff at the theatres, which provided an important context for my research as it provided insight into how seriously theatre is taken in Russia, and its importance as a social and political art form. In hindsight, Moscow and St Petersburg proved to be very useful for my research due to the fact that I was able to attend a wide range of theatres and performances during my time in Russia, exposing me to the wider theatregoing culture in the capital.

Another important reason for basing my fieldwork in Moscow was to carry out interviews with theatre makers and critics who are active in the New Drama movement. In Moscow and St Petersburg I also attended a number of talks and after

show interviews with theatre practitioners, including Teatr.doc artistic directors Ugarov and Gremina, playwright Natalya Vorozhbit, and directors Dmitrii Volkostrelov and Andrei Mai. While the playwrights analysed in this thesis originally come from across the country (and in the case of Pavel Pryzhako, Belarus), the majority live and work in Moscow.¹⁸ For this reason it was vital to base my groundwork in the capital. It is worth pointing out that New Drama is explicitly centred around Moscow, and despite the disparate geographical origins of the playwrights, New Drama remains a Moscow-centric artistic movement. Visiting Moscow also enabled me to access archival material stored at Teatr.doc, which included programmes and promotional material, video recordings of previous productions, and transcripts of post-show discussions.

A challenge that arose during my research in Russia is the fact that the subject of political art and opposition to the Putin regime are sensitive topics, as the spectre of artistic repression is a real possibility. During the course of writing my thesis, Teatr.doc was evicted from two separate buildings, and, at the time of writing, prominent theatre director Kirill Serebrennikov is under house arrest on what are believed by some to be politically motivated charges of embezzlement and fraud. Some theatre makers are, therefore, understandably reluctant to discuss their theatre within a political context, especially relating to the Putin regime. This was something I had anticipated, and as a result the majority of my questions did not explicitly ask about Putinism or the oppositional nature of the practitioners' work. Instead, I focused on what the original inspiration for their plays were, the research methods, and how they thought their play were received by their audience.

My status as a foreign researcher also caused some difficulties while conducting my research. In Russia, Western influence is often treated with mistrust, compounded by claims made by the Kremlin that Western-backed NGOs are interfering in the country's democratic process. Anti-Putin protests and opposition to the state's official discourse on the arts is taboo in Russia, and understandably individuals were unwilling to discuss their involvement in demonstrations or the political nature of their theatre. Therefore, my questions and fieldwork in Russia did

¹⁸ The statement that most New Drama writers live in Moscow was more accurate at the start of my thesis in 2013 than it is now. Due to the increasingly repressive artistic policies of the Putin regime, a number of high-profile theatre artists and playwrights have moved abroad. For example, in the last year Moscow based playwrights Natalya Vorozhbit and Maksim Kurochkin have both moved back to their native Ukraine.

not explicitly ask about anti-Putin sentiment, but nonetheless provided me with important insight into political attitudes. While the majority of people I contacted in Russia were extremely generous with their time and complimentary about the nature of my thesis, on occasion I encountered the attitude that only Russian scholars and critics were qualified to analyse the political nature of Russian theatre. Despite this, my fieldwork in Russia proved to be invaluable to this thesis and my understanding of Russian theatre in general.

My positionality as a non-Russian researcher working in a Russian context also provided an important opportunity for this thesis to make an original contribution to the field of Russian theatre scholarship and performance studies. By drawing on new material not readily accessible to an English-speaking readership this thesis offers a unique insight into contemporary Russian theatre practices for non-Russian speakers. Through undertaking translations of play-texts, scholarly articles, and other contemporary sources that are either unpublished or only available in Russian-language publications, I have provided new insight into this important body of theatrical work and its engagement with the politics of the Putin regime.

Foregrounding these texts in an English-language thesis offers the chance to provide an original contribution and expand on the extant knowledge and understanding of these plays and theatre makers in an academic context. My status as a foreign scholar has also been of advantage when undertaking research. As noted elsewhere in this thesis, New Drama has developed and proliferated due to a series of enduring cross-cultural artistic dialogues with international theatre makers and intuitions including the Royal Court Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company. I have actively participated and engaged with this dialogue, by attending workshops, talks, and rehearsed readings staged by Russian theatre makers in the United Kingdom, which has offered me a further opportunity to consider these plays within the wider field of performance studies.

My research trips in the period 2013-2016 occurred at a time of unprecedented flux in twenty-first century Russian politics and theatre. Following the wave of mass protests during Putin's presidential election campaign in the winter of 2011-12, there was a turn in the cultural policies of the Kremlin, with the authorities implementing censorship and disrupting the working practices of artists and theatres. In the summer of 2014, the government banned the use of *mat* in literature, film, music, and theatre. Due to the frequent use of *mat* in New Drama plays, venues staging new writing had

to reconfigure their repertoires and a number of New Drama productions were removed from regular performance.¹⁹ Furthermore, as noted above, in widely publicised events, Teatr.doc was evicted from its premises twice in the space of six months. This meant that for a prolonged period of time the artists at Teatr.doc had no access to their offices or archives.

Finally, a further methodological issue I have had to address is the fact that the majority of the theatre practitioners I contacted during my research do not speak English. Furthermore, while there has been a great effort made to translate New Drama plays into English-language texts, the majority of the canon is, understandably, only available in Russian.²⁰ To complete my study I have been required to engage in conversations in Russian, and also translate both published and unpublished scripts. In the summer before I started this thesis I spent four months residing in Moscow, studying and immersing myself to improve my Russian-language ability. Throughout my research I have continued to improve my Russian-language ability with continued study.

Putin and Periodisation

The plays examined in depth in this study were originally produced between 2001 and 2015. In justifying the starting point of this thesis, I have considered a diverse range of cultural, political, and artistic factors. The first reason is related to this project's consideration of contemporary Russian playwriting in the political context of the Putin era. The years 2000 to date incorporate Putin's first two presidential terms between 2000 and 2008, and his current third term that runs from 2012 to 2018. This period also includes Putin's tenure as Prime Minister between the years 2008 and 2012 while Dmitrii Medvedev served as president, which has been observed as the perpetuation of 'Putinism without Putin.'²¹ The date of Putin's ascendancy to the interim presidency on 31 December 1999, following Boris Yeltsin's unexpected

¹⁹ It should be noted that the only Moscow theatre to ignore the ban and continue to stage productions that included *mat* was Teatr.doc.

²⁰ It must be noted that there has been a concerted effort made to translate the work of New Drama playwrights for an English speaking audience. These translators include: Noah Birksted-Breen, Sasha Dugdale, and John Freedman.

²¹ For example, Sakwa has used this term to describe the Medvedev administration. See Sakwa (2010) 71. Additionally, J. L. Black observes that the term 'tandem' was used in Russia to delineate the working relationship between Putin and Medvedev. Black argues that this 'tandem' unofficially privileged the authority of the prime minister over the president. Black (2014) 17. As an editorial in *Novaya Gazeta* succinctly phrased it, 'the Tandem: Putin is at the helm'. *Novaya Gazeta* (2011)

resignation, marks a specific turning point in the development of post-Soviet politics in Russia. This is acknowledged by Sakwa, who observes that ‘the 1990s have now gained almost mythical status in contemporary Russia as a period of disaster and collapse.’²² The idea that Putin’s succession to the presidency at the turn of the millennium was an emblematic juncture where the country emerged from the ‘chaos’ of the Yeltsin-era is echoed by Russian political scientist Lilia Shevtsova: ‘after the presidential election [won by Putin in March 2000] the process of turning Yeltsin’s political chaos into a “democracy” controlled by the center had begun.’²³ Furthermore, January 2000 has been identified as a crucial turning point in Putin’s popularity with the Russian electorate. White and McAllister assert the importance of this date as turning point for Putin, observing that his inauguration as president and his vigorous pursuit of the Second Chechen War meant that by January 2000 he had the support of 62% of the Russian electorate who planned to vote in the March election of that year.²⁴

Before reviewing the burgeoning body of work on Putinism and the Putin administration, it is worth reflecting on the criteria for my selection of literature on contemporary Russian politics and society. As will be considered throughout this thesis, Putinism is a complex and multifarious political ideology. In order to examine New Drama in the context of the Putin era, I have drawn on a diverse range of materials on Putinism from both English and Russian-language sources. It is important to note here that since Putin’s election to the Presidency in 2000 independent media in Russia has been gradually co-opted by the state. Freedom of the press has been curtailed and restricted. Additionally, the Kremlin seized control of independent media outlets including television channels NTV and ORT during Putin’s first term in office in what was labelled the ‘war on the oligarchs’.²⁵ Moreover, the upsurge in state endorsed studies and biographies of Putin that serve to promote the ideologies and narratives tendentious to the regime have created an idealised image of Putin as President in some Russian-language publications.²⁶

²² Sakwa (2008b) ix.

²³ Shevtsova (2005) 101.

²⁴ White and McAllister (2010) 143.

²⁵ For more information see Kovalev (2000). This will be discussed in further detail below and in Chapter Three.

²⁶ For example, Helena Goscilo has listed a number of biographies and studies dedicated to Putin that saturate the market in Russia. Goscilo (2013a) 30.

In selecting source material on Putinism I have paid particular attention to its relevance to the individual plays discussed in the main body of the thesis. At the crux of the thesis is a detailed analysis of the eight productions that serve as case studies and the significance of their staging in twenty-first century Russia. While I have drawn on various and multifaceted academic and contemporary sources - including Slavonic studies, Russian history, and journalistic work - the parameters for the selection of materials on Putinism referenced in this study has also been defined by the dramatic output of the playwrights and relates to the topics and issues raised in the productions. Therefore, this thesis's close reading of the plays in performance utilises key materials by leading scholars and journalists on contemporary Russian politics to consider how playwrights have interrogated the rhetoric of the Kremlin and articulated an oppositional discourse that reflects wider protest movements within contemporary Russia. By examining these fundamental facets of Putinism alongside New Drama productions this thesis provides a contribution to the study of contemporary Russian playwriting as well as to the field of theatre and performance studies. The intersection between New Drama and Putinism demonstrates how theatre makers employ manifold theatrical forms and aesthetics to provide one of the most vital forms of opposition to the Putin regime.

I will now move on to consider some of the key scholarly debates on the ideology of Putinism. Since Putin's re-election as president of Russia in 2012, there has been a plethora of new English-language political biographies and publications on Putin and Putinism. While it would be almost impossible to give a concise account of all literature written on Russian politics over the previous fifteen years, this section aims to synthesise the prominent academic literature on Putin and Putinism, and to identify how Putinism has manifested itself and evolved since 2000.

Putin's political stance and ideology is often held by both scholars and journalists to be encapsulated in a single line from a speech he gave during the earliest days of his curtailed term as prime minister between August and December 1999, in which he rallied the Russian nation to 'get off its knees' and demonstrate its power. This memorable personification of the nation as a fallen fighter on its knees, which can be interpreted in a variety of ways, is often quoted as it resonates with a variety of scholarly appraisals of Putinism as a fluid and indefinable political ideology. One of the most prominent scholars of contemporary Russian politics is Richard Sakwa.

Among his large body of work, his two seminal monographs - *Russian Politics and Society* and *Putin: Russia's Choice* - elucidate Putinism as follows:

the political amorphousness of the quasi-centre but at the same time potentially transcend[ing] it [...] Putin himself is an enigma. It was clear that support for Putin in the 2000 presidential elections was not based on any real appreciation of his policies, since other than the vigorous pursuit of the war in Chechnya, it was unclear what these policies were.²⁷

Sakwa views Putin's policies as paradoxical, in that his attempts to fill centrist ground have resulted in the creation of a contradictory political identity that cannot be delineated in traditional terms. He further cites Russian sociologist Olga Kryshтанovskaya who argues that Putinism is simultaneously both of the left wing and right wing of the political spectrum.²⁸ To Sakwa, the discernible contrasts in the political facets of Putinism are further exemplified by Putin's use of both 'neo-Soviet' and 'post-Soviet' rhetoric and public performances for the Russian media.²⁹ 'These two faces', Sakwa argues, 'allowed Putin within the space of a few weeks to inaugurate a plaque in the Lubyanka honouring Andropov, the head of the KGB from 1967-82, and then to place flowers at the grave of Andrei Sakharov, one of the most outstanding liberal dissidents and victim of Andropov's "second Cold War" of 1979-82'.³⁰ A further example of Putin's seemingly paradoxical attitude towards the legacy of the Soviet Union in twenty-first century Russia can be seen by his address to the Federal Assembly in March 2005, where he called the break-up of the Soviet Union 'a tragedy for the Russian people' and 'the largest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century'.³¹ This contrasts with the sentiments expressed in his manifesto *Russia at the Turn of the Millennium*:

Communism and Soviet power did not make Russia a prosperous country with a dynamically developing society and free people [...] However bitter it may

²⁷ Sakwa (2008a) 473.

²⁸ Kryshтанovskaya in Sakwa (2014) 27.

²⁹ Sakwa (2008b) 39-40 and 152.

³⁰ Ibid. 40.

³¹ Putin (2005)

be now to admit it, for nearly seven decades we were moving along a blind alley, far from the mainstream of civilisation.³²

The pre-existing collection of academic literature on Putin's Russia is driven by an attempt to define the ideology of Putinism, and explain his widespread popularity with the Russian electorate. This view of Putinism as a nebulous political ideology, which has bolstered its support through vague and contradictory policies, has been challenged by a number of scholars of contemporary Russian politics and society. Simon Pirani suggests that key to Putin's rise to power and his continued success and popularity with the Russia electorate is the administration's ability to harness the global oil boom in the early 2000s to increase the general standard of living in Russia.³³ This point is reiterated by Stephen White and Ian McAllister. They argue that the 'Putin phenomenon' can be associated with the high value placed by the regime on economic prosperity during Putin's first two terms in office between 2000 and 2008.³⁴ Furthermore, in her work on the Putin administration's cultural policies, political scientist Lena Jonson summarises: 'just as during the harsh realities of Soviet times there had been the promise of a glorious future and a better life, Putin now promised stability, and a harmonious and corporate striving towards the goal of a golden economic future'.³⁵ Jonson further argues that Putinism has a firm ideological stance, suggesting that:

while Western scholars claimed that the Putin regime lacked an ideology, this [has become] less and less the case as the outline of a Putin consensus gradually took on a more distinct form. Western scholars may be forgiven as this policy was initially not formulated on paper but took shape in interactions with major actors, among them the church. The evolving consensus was, however, reflected in words and deeds by high-level state representatives.³⁶

Jonson highlights four aspects that she identifies as part of the 'Putin consensus': State nationalism, Russia the Nation, Russia the Orthodox Nation, and A Unique

³² Putin (2008) 320.

³³ Pirani (2010) 1-2.

³⁴ White and McAllister (2010)153-5.

³⁵ Jonson (2015) 33.

³⁶ Ibid 32.

Russian Path.³⁷ For Jonson, the celebration of Russia's history (and in particular the Second World War), coupled with the revivification of the Orthodox Church, and a growing anti-Western sentiment in Russia, are key aspects of Putinism. At the core of Jonson's thinking is that Putinism can be defined through its increasingly nationalistic agenda. Jonson's theory has been bolstered by the ongoing Russian military interventions in Ukraine, which have been justified as the reunification of a pan-Orthodox axis united by language and religion.

Extant work on Putinism by Russian critics has become increasingly limited during Putin's presidency, as the regime seeks to repress dissenting voices that subvert the official discourse of Putinism. Examples of the Kremlin's brutal silencing of anti-Putin critics can be seen in the murder of journalist Anna Politkovskaia outside her apartment in central Moscow in October 2006. Scholar of Russian politics Stephen White claims that Politkovskaia's front line reports on the bloody reality of the Second Chechen War were 'an obvious motive for the attack.'³⁸ Another example is the jailing of Nikolai Andrushchenko, editor of newspaper *Novy Peterburg* in 2007 on charges of defamation and obstruction of justice after his coverage of a 2006 murder investigation in St Petersburg that exposed corruption among high-profile members of the city's authorities. Despite the spectre of authoritarian repression by the regime, there remains vital journalistic work that provides an oppositional stance against the Kremlin. The majority of this coverage is published in the Russian-language broadsheet newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, which is where Politkovskaia published her coverage of the Second Chechen War. This publication has articulated a number of salient anxieties around Putinism and has been a key source in challenging the official state narrative.

In the context of New Drama, there have been numerous instances of theatre makers incorporating facts and materials from *Novaya Gazeta*'s coverage of Russian society and politics into their plays. This trend is particularly apparent in the documentary theatre productions created by Gremina at Teatr.doc. For example, her play *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* (*Chas Vosemnadtsat'*, 2010, expanded in 2012), which is examined in detail in Chapter Five, includes reports from *Novaya Gazeta* editor Dimitrii Muratov in the script. Another example of the staging of *Novaya Gazeta* reportage is the 2016 production *New Antigone* (*Novaya Antigona*, 2016), a

³⁷ Ibid. 32-7.

³⁸ White (2011) 199.

collaboration between Gremina and *Novaya Gazeta* journalist Elena Kostyuchenko.³⁹ The play documents the arrest of six mothers whose children died in the Beslan school hostage crisis in September 2004. The women were subsequently incarcerated for protesting against the Kremlin's refusal to provide an adequate investigation of the massacre, while wearing t-shirts emblazoned with the provocative slogan 'Putin – the executioner of Beslan'. The diminution of a free press in Russia has seen theatre and new playwriting take the place of traditional journalism by providing the amplification of marginalised voices and the foregrounding of topical events and discourses excluded from official state rhetoric.⁴⁰

In the scholarship cited above, the start of the new millennium serves as a karyotic moment in the development of post-Soviet Russian politics. In the official discourse of Putinism, this date also serves as a key point of departure: Putin himself has defined the turn of the millennium as a significant and singular moment in the development of the Russian nation. On 29 December 1999, two days before the start of his premiership, Putin published his 'Millennium Manifesto', *Russia at the Turn of the Millennium*, online and in daily broadsheet newspaper *Izvestia*. Here, Putin abrogated Yeltsin's post-Soviet project and outlined the basis of his own ideology, underscoring a set of key concerns and principles that he identifies as traditional Russian values that the country needed to re-embrace. Putin's manifesto marked the new millennium as the start of a new political epoch and an important historical moment in the shaping of the Russian nation:

The contemporary world lives under the sign of two global events: the new millennium and the two-thousandth anniversary of Christianity. In my view the enormous interest in these two events represents something greater and deeper than just the tradition of celebrating significant dates.⁴¹

2000 was also a significant year in the defining of Putinism. In the first of his annual State of the Nation addresses on 8 July 2000, Putin set out the state-building rhetoric

³⁹ Kostyuchenko is a prominent investigative reporter and LGBTQ activist. She was one of the first journalists in Russia to report on Pussy Riot.

⁴⁰ For example, Molly Flynn notes that two contemporary playwrights, Nina Belenitskaia and Ekaterina Bondarenko, originally trained as journalists before turning their attention to theatre. See Flynn (2015) 10.

⁴¹ Putin (2008) 317.

that would form the ideological foundations of Putinism, including his desire to strengthen the power of the state and the president, as well as laying out the economic principles of Putinism.⁴²

Finally, in my consideration of the significance of the year 2000 as a starting point for this thesis, it is important to consider the outbreak of the Second Chechen War in October 1999, which continued into the 2000s. For a number of Russian commentators, the violent conflict is indelibly associated with the emergence of Putinism and Putin's state-building programmes. Editor of *Novaya Gazeta*, Dimitrii Muratov, wrote in 2014 that 'all that is happening today is but a consequence of this war.'⁴³ Similarly, Russian human rights activist Sergei Kovalev asserts that Putin's initial popularity with the Russian electorate was due to his success in the war, but reflecting on Putin's nascent authoritarian stance observes that 'I fear it is very likely that the year 2000 will someday be referred to as the "twilight of Russian freedom"'.⁴⁴

The second reason this study takes the year 2000 as a starting point is that the turn of the millennium saw the explosion of new theatrical modes and techniques practised by Russian theatre makers and playwrights. This important shift in the artistic practice of new theatre writing has been identified by a number of prominent academics and critics. Theatre critic for the *Moscow Times* John Freedman, observes that the late 1990s and early 2000s marked the revivification of the Russian theatre as an artistic force.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Freedman argues that 'the extraordinary fruits of the boom in dramatic writing that began in the late 1990s and continues to this day' have been a vital influence on the development of Russian theatre and drama in the twenty-first century.⁴⁶ Beumers and Lipovetsky agree with Freedman's assertion that the start of the millennium marked a key moment in the development of new writing:

Russian culture of the beginning of the twenty-first century has been characterized by a powerful boom of drama. In the late 1990s and early 2000s young writers have actively engaged in playwriting – producing no less plays than there were poems or novels.⁴⁷

⁴² See Putin (2000).

⁴³ Muratov (2014).

⁴⁴ Kovalev (2000).

⁴⁵ Freedman (2015).

⁴⁶ Freedman (2010a) 81.

⁴⁷ Beumers and Lipovetsky (2009) 28.

Russian academic Ilya Smirnov also contends that a new playwriting culture emerged contemporaneously with the 2000s.⁴⁸

In particular, 2000 was an important year in the development of new playwriting in Russia. Firstly, a significant moment in the development of the thematics of contemporary playwriting was the performance of a rehearsed reading of Sigarev's play *Plasticine* at the Liubimovka New Writing Festival in 2000.⁴⁹ *Plasticine* is one of the case studies analysed in depth in Chapter Four, and is described by Freedman as being the 'play that kicked off the term "new drama" in earnest'.⁵⁰ Furthermore, in December 2000 the first Russian festival of documentary theatre in Moscow, provided the opportunity for numerous young playwrights to stage their documentary plays and introduced Russian audiences to the verbatim playwriting techniques imparted to Russian theatre makers at the Royal Court's workshops.⁵¹ Another important development was the critical and commercial success of Yevgenii Grishkovets's debut play *How I Ate A Dog* (*Kak Ia Sel Sobaku*, 1998), a one-person show about his experience of being drafted into the Soviet navy as a teenager. *How I Ate A Dog*, which was written, directed, and performed by Grishkovets, premièred at the Central Academic Theatre of the Russian Army in 1998 and toured numerous Moscow theatres for two years before winning both the 'Innovation' category and 'Critics' Prize' at the 2000 Golden Mask festival - the national theatre award for drama, opera, ballet and modern dance. The production subsequently toured Europe, including a run at the Royal Court Theatre in 2000. Grishkovets became the first of a new generation of playwrights to achieve widespread popularity and critical acclaim, raising the profile of new Russian theatre writing in the country and abroad.

Among Russian theatre makers and critics, there is a similar sentiment echoed that the start of the 2000s marked a significant moment in the evolution of post-Soviet playwriting. Moscow based critic Pavel Rudnev argues that there was a lacuna

⁴⁸ Smirnov (2000).

⁴⁹ The Liubimovka New Writing Festival was originally founded in 1991 by playwrights Elena Gremina and Alexei Kazantsev as retreat for playwrights, actors, and directors to come together to perform and discuss the variety of new plays that were being written across Russia, but could not find a theatre to produce them. The event was held annually in the grounds of Stanislavskii's country estate just outside Moscow, from which the festival took its name. The festival is now staged every September at Teatr.doc, under the direction of playwright Mikhail Durnenkov.

⁵⁰ Freedman (2011).

⁵¹ The festival was held across three venues in central Moscow, the Children's Musical Theatre of Young Actors, the School of Modern Drama, and Konstantin Stanislavski's house museum.

between Liudmila Petrushevskaja's plays in the 1980s and the 1990s that resulted in a 'lost generation' of playwrights.⁵² According to playwright and co-founder of Teatr.doc Ivan Vyrypaev, the 1990s were a 'vacuum in modern drama'.⁵³ Additionally, Alexander Rodionov, whose documentary play *The Battle of the Moldovans for a Cardboard Box* (*Voina Moldovan Za Kartonnuiu Korobku*, 2003) was one of the first productions included in Teatr.doc's repertoire, underscores the significance of the Royal Court Theatre's workshop in April 2000: 'for me, something really changed only in April 2000.'⁵⁴ As observed above, the influence of the Royal Court Theatre's International Department in Russia is controversial and contested, but it is clear that it provided an important demarcation between what came before and after.

Another consideration for why New Drama emerged in the 2000s can be attributed to a generational change in who was writing new plays. While this shift in generations did not occur across all of Russian theatre, Freedman notes that, 'in the 1990s, most of the major writers of the previous era - Liudmila Petrushevskaja, Nina Sadur, Liudmila Razumovskaja, and Mikhail Roshchin, to name just a few - either wrote less, stopped writing altogether, or were produced significantly less often than they had been during the 1980s.'⁵⁵ Gremina has also attested that in the 2000s, there was a transformation in the audience members attending new writing productions in Moscow, stating that the audience members who attend Teatr.doc are 'very young'.⁵⁶ My own experience of attending theatre productions in Russia during my research corroborates Gremina's suggestion. In the context of this study's consideration of New Drama's relationship to the nascent anti-Putin protest movement, it is important to note the part played by this young generation, who had come of age after the collapse of communism, in the demonstrations against Putin's re-election as president in 2011 and 2012. In his ground-breaking study *Protest in Putin's Russia*, Mishca Gabowitsch observes that 'the new importance of street protests gave new prominence to youth-centred opposition groups and parties' youth wings.'⁵⁷ Gabowitsch argues that, for many young protestors participating in the protests against Putin's inauguration for a third term as president on 6 May 2012, the

⁵² Rudnev (2004) 5.

⁵³ Vyrypaev (2004).

⁵⁴ Rodionov and Kurochkin (2015).

⁵⁵ Freedman (2010b) 390.

⁵⁶ Gremina (2006) 135.

⁵⁷ Gabowitsch (2017) 122.

experience was akin to ‘a romantic revolutionary spring.’⁵⁸ This view has been echoed by playwright Borodina, author of *The Bolotnaya Square Case*, who describes her participation in a protest in her home city of Yekaterinburg on 6 May 2012 as ‘terribly safe and terribly romantic’⁵⁹

A final reason for the starting point of this thesis is that a crucial factor which facilitated the growth of New Drama in the 2000s and 2010, was the rise of the Internet. Political scholar Sarah Oates observes that the turn of the millennium heralded the start of an unprecedented rise of Russians with access to the Internet. Oates writes that:

from 2000 to 2010, the numbers of Russians online grew twenty-fold, reaching 59.7 million users or 43 percent of the population by the end of 2010. This growth not only out-stripped virtually anywhere in Western Europe, but also meant that Russia added far more in sheer numbers than other post-Soviet countries with high internet growth in the same period [...] This also has contributed to the growth of the Russian language online, as Russian became one of the top 10 languages used in the online sphere by 2011.⁶⁰

The Internet has been utilised as a fruitful source to generate theatrical material. Gremina and Ugarov’s play *September.doc* (*Sentyabr.doc*, 2005) is a collection of monologues and dialogues originally posted on internet blogs, forums, and chat rooms, in the immediate aftermath of the Beslan massacre. Gremina and Ugarov’s use of online diatribes to create the text for *September.doc* examined anti-Chechen attitudes in Russia and exposed the outpouring of racist vitriol and political cynicism that occurred online in the aftermath of Beslan.

The Internet has also played a key part in facilitating a frisson of energy and excitement around New Drama. New Drama’s parallel rise with the Russian-language Internet is highlighted by the name of prominent New Drama venue Teatr.doc. The use of file extension ‘.doc’ in the theatre’s name knowingly refers to the numerous documentary productions included in the theatre’s repertoire since it opened in 2002, but also links the online culture and social media website that Teatr.doc’s artistic

⁵⁸ Ibid. 9.

⁵⁹ Borodina (2015b).

⁶⁰ Oates (2013) 55-6

directors utilise to promote the theatre and New Drama in general.⁶¹ Theatre makers and audience members use online platforms to exchange ideas, post news, advertise upcoming events, and share photographs and reviews. In particular, the use of blogs and the websites LiveJournal and Facebook have provided important online platforms for disseminating this material.⁶² The use of social media has become part of Teatr.doc's policy of encouraging their audience to participate in wider civic engagement. As well as gaining revenue from a number of successful crowd-funding campaigns, one of which was entitled 'Save Teatr.doc', the theatre regularly holds volunteer days that are organised on Facebook, where members of the public help maintain the space along with the actors, playwrights, and directors who work for the company. After the eviction of Teatr.doc from their original space in December 2014, the company used Facebook and other social media platforms to galvanise a small army of volunteers to help rapidly secure a new venue and transform it into operating functioning theatre venue. In this way, the promotional and organisational tactics utilised by the New Drama practitioners are comparable to the anti-Putin protest wave that swept across Russia in 2011-13. Analogously, social media was used as a primary form of communication for the protestors as well as a way to mobilise grassroots action.⁶³ More recently, Teatr.doc have utilised the Internet to disseminate and share their productions to audience members unable to attend performances in Moscow. For example, in November 2016 a performance of *The Bolotnaya Square Case* and the subsequent after show discussion was filmed using multiple cameras and live-streamed on YouTube around the world.

The use of the Internet and social media platforms as a way to promote wider civic engagement and disseminate material to a global audience is not peculiar to Russia. In considering the global growth of the Internet since the turn of the millennium it is worth reflecting on how the rise of social media has impacted on global protest movements in relation to New Drama and the Russian protest wave of 2011-13. Theatre scholars Mohamed Samir El-Khatib and Sophie Nield observe that the Internet and transnational social networks online played an important role in the global protests at the start of the 2010s, including the Occupy movement and the Arab

⁶¹ Similar observations have been made by Beumers and Lipovetsky (2008) 298, and Flynn (2015) 9.

⁶² For example, as of September 2017, Teatr.doc is currently followed by over 18,000 people on Facebook. Anecdotally, I have found Facebook the easiest way to communicate with the theatre makers I have connected with during the writing of this thesis.

⁶³ See Gabowitsch (2017) 151-3.

Spring in 2011.⁶⁴ Considering the occupation of Cairo's Tahrir Square by Egyptian protests in January 2011, El-Khatib argues that 'while the revolution in technology gave Egyptian dissidents the power to reject the past and its outdated values, global cyberspace also allowed them to keep abreast of what was happening in the world around them and to form alternative political ideas about liberty, social justice and different ways of living.'⁶⁵

In his article 'Tahrir Square as Spectacle: Some Exploratory Remarks on Place, Body and Power', El-Khatib frames the Egyptian revolution of 2011 as the contestation of the official political rhetoric of the state, which was challenged through the rejection of this official state discourse and the 'liberation' of space through public occupation.⁶⁶ His article analyses the Egyptian revolution from the perspective of theatre and performance studies, in an attempt to examine how protest lifts 'the curtain on an explosive, performing body that has slipped away from the grip of power and sought to challenge its sociocultural and linguistic constraints.'⁶⁷

Although some scholars have argued that anti-Putin protests have operated within a specific Russian context, the political concerns of New Drama overlap with wider international contexts of dissent and protest in the twenty-first century identified by El-Khatib, which have in part been facilitated by the rise of the Internet.⁶⁸ In this thesis's inquiry into the political nature of contemporary theatre practice in Russia, it can be seen that at the crux of New Drama playwrights have comparatively addressed anxieties over official state narratives and discourse. The international context of New Drama is an important framework for understanding the emergence and development of the movement. Situating New Drama within a global context and international theatre scholarship provides a useful context for discussing the political nature of these productions.

As I have demonstrated, the rationale for the historical framework of my thesis centres on, not only the shift in theatre practices at the start of the 2000s, but also the emergence of a number of significant cultural and political developments. The sudden arrival of the charismatic figure of Putin who embodied Russia's revival on the global

⁶⁴ El-Khatib (2013) 109-10 and Nield (2015) 121.

⁶⁵ El-Khatib (2013) 110.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 104.

⁶⁸ For example, Gabowitsch argues that - with the notable exception of the feminist punk-rock group Pussy Riot - the anti-Putin protests in the early 2010s were often surprisingly disengaged from the actions and rhetoric of the contemporaneous globalised protest movements.

stage, facilitated the emergence of a new political engagement by theatre makers, who have looked for new ways to articulate and interrogate the political and social relations of twenty-first century Russia.

Thesis Structure

This thesis explores the intersection between New Drama and Putinism through five themed chapters. The first chapter surveys the theatrical landscape in Russia at the turn of the millennium, focusing on the political and historical contexts of New Drama in Russian theatre and culture. The subsequent chapters focus on specific case studies. Chapter Two explores the development of political satire throughout Putin's presidency by contrasting Varvara Faer's *BerlusPutin* (2012) and Viktor Teterin's *Putin.doc* (2005). These plays demonstrate two distinct modes of satirical intervention and foreground divergent attitudes towards Putin. The analysis of these productions provides an introduction to key elements of Putinism and contemporary Russian theatre's engagement with the anti-Putin protest movement that emerged in the 2010s.

Chapter Three considers the complex legacy of the Second Chechen War (1999-2009) and the revivification of a militarised society in modern Russia. The Second Chechen War was the defining feature of Putin's first term as President between 2000 and 2004. He viewed its success as his making or breaking, declaring, 'my [...] historical mission - it may sound lofty, but it's true - is to resolve the situation in the Northern Caucasus'.⁶⁹ The war saw the first gagging of the Russian media by Putin, with reporters pressurised to capitalise on the patriotic sentiment that surrounded the war in its early months. This chapter analyses Mikhail and Vyacheslav Durnenkov's *The Drunks (Pianii, 2009)* and Pavel Pryzahko's *The Soldier (Soldat, 2011)*, which both subvert the idealised stereotype of soldiers and veterans propagated by the Kremlin. Central to this chapter is my argument that Russian playwrights have subverted the strengthening of militarised gender identities under Putinism. Using these two very different productions, I propose writers have aimed to undermine an idealised notion of masculinity and the war hero, focusing their depictions of soldiers and war veterans on their frailties and fears, and suggesting they have been marginalised by the policies of Putinism.

⁶⁹ Putin (2000) 139.

Chapter Four examines the consequences of the expanding social divide under the Putin administration as depicted in two plays by Vasily Sigarev: *Plasticine* (*Plastilin*, 2000) and *Black Milk* (*Chernoie Moloko*, 2001). Putinism has focused on modernising European Russia in the west to the detriment of provincial cities in the north and south of the country, which have experienced growing poverty and social deprivation. Sigarev creates alternative narratives that focus on marginalised sections of Russian society at the turn of the millennium. The plays raise important questions that challenge the discourse of Putinism that the 2000s were characterised by stability, in contrast with the social and economic chaos of the Boris Yeltsin era.

Chapter Five investigates the relationship between Russian documentary theatre and the Kremlin's politicisation of justice and the legal system through close analysis of two Teatr.doc productions, *The Bolotnaya Square Case* (*Bolotnoe Delo*, 2015) by Polina Borodina and *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* (*Chas Vosemnadtsat*', 2010, expanded in 2012), by Elena Gremina. Exploring the two case studies in the context of notions of justice and the 'fictitious legalism' of the Putin regime, I argue that the status of documents in *samizdat* literature of the Soviet Union is reflected in the documentary theatre of the 2000s and 2010s. By examining these two plays in the context of *samizdat*, this chapter contends that the act of documentation and the privileging of the document is a vital feature of documentary theatre in Russia, and is key to understanding how theatre-makers have employed the aesthetics of 'theatre of the real' to undermine the official discourse of the Putin regime and challenge their audience to consider their own role in challenging these manipulated judicial narratives.⁷⁰

Translation and Transliteration.

It is important to take a moment to discuss my use of translations and transliteration throughout this thesis. Where English translations of play-texts and other Russian-language sources already exist, these have been used. In cases where no English-language translation has been published or is readily available, translations are my own. Throughout this thesis I use the Library of Congress (ALA-LC) system of transliteration for transliterations from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet. For ease of readership and in order to avoid confusion, I render well-known names in their

⁷⁰ 'Theatre of the real' is a term used by theatre scholar Carol Martin. For a definition, see Martin (2013) 5.

familiar transliterated form (for example Ilya rather than Il'ya; Natalya rather than Natal'ia).

Having introduced the primary aims for this thesis, I will now turn my attention to addressing the historical context of New Drama and its evolution in the 2000s.

Chapter One: New Drama and Theatre Contexts

Introduction

As I have set out in the introduction to this thesis, the turn of the millennium marked an important moment in the development of new theatre writing in Russia. The unanticipated arrival of New Drama resulted in a contentious debate about what the origins of the movement were. The precipitous emergence of a new cultural movement had historical precedent in Russian theatre history. As theatre scholar Amy Skinner has observed in her article ‘Exploring the hinterlands: avant-garde temporality, socialist realism, and Pogodin’s *Aristocrats*’, the mid-1930s were a period when state supported socialist realism was implemented to replace the avant-garde theatre practices of directors such as Vsevolod Meyerhold. Skinner defines such periods as ‘hinterlands’, ‘the moments when avant-garde practice shifts and develops into new, post-avant-garde, theatrical languages.’¹

In the case of New Drama this emergence of a new theatre moment was ascribed to foreign influence, as opposed to an official shift in state policy on the arts as occurred in the Soviet Union. The impact of the Royal Court Theatre’s International Department in Russia is paramount to understanding why there was such a hotly contested debate about the origins of New Drama. In 1999 and 2000 the Royal Court held a series of workshops and seminars that introduced young Russian writers to the British tradition of a playwright-led theatre and documentary theatre forms. In a country where Western influence is often treated with mistrust and the Russian theatrical tradition is a source of national pride it was perhaps unsurprising that there was a backlash towards the Royal Court influence on young Russian playwrights.

Both Russian and foreign critics levelled claims of cultural imperialism at the Royal Court, accusing it of debasing Russian theatre in a quest for new productions that complemented the theatre’s artistic policies. Playwright Oleg Bogaev stated ‘we have a notion these days called “New Drama” The language used there is not mine. It’s a naïve kind of art that exists outside the Russian tradition’.² Theatre critic Grigorii Zaslavskii (2004) described ‘a foreign bottle with poisoned ink [that had]

¹ Skinner (2016) 257.

² Bogaev in Freedman (2006) 19

sailed from England'.³ Some commentators went further, linking the influence exerted by the Royal Court and British Council on Russian theatre to the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, implying a tacit link between the West's political and artistic policies in Eastern Europe.⁴ Ross (2006) has also compared the British Council's role in post-Soviet Russian culture to the Allied efforts in post-World War II Germany.⁵

I situate my chapter within this debate about the origins of New Drama and the importance of the Royal Court's influence on the development of new playwriting at the turn of the millennium. I start by addressing the new writing scene in the 1990s. I then give an account of the workshops staged by the Royal Court in 1999 and 2000, surveying the reception of the theatre's influence by Russian theatre makers and critics. I also introduce the technique of verbatim theatre that was introduced to the Russian playwrights by the Royal Court during these lectures. I then finish this chapter by providing a second important influence on New Drama: the plays of Liudmila Petrushevskaja in the 1970s and 80s.

Theatre in the 1990s

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the introduction of a market economy had a huge impact on Russian theatre. In the 1990s box office revenue became of far greater importance and, as a result, lavish and heavily-financed productions became *de rigueur*, resulting in the closure of many of small, experimental studio theatres that had previously relied on state funding. Those that survived ultimately succumbed to the pressures of commercialisation and integrated themselves into the mainstream, producing plays by established writers that would draw in large and stable audience numbers. In the mid-1990s, the opportunities for practising playwrights to have their work published or staged in an established theatrical space were greatly reduced.⁶ Writers were often limited to creating commission-based adaptations of classic novels or foreign plays, and many subsidised themselves by writing for prime-time television

³ Zaslavskii in Otkasatcya ot... (2004).

⁴ 'The list of organisations that sponsor this transformation of [Russian] theatre (the British Council, the French Cultural Centre, and the Goethe Institute in Germany) and hurry to enlighten us about New Drama, are the same powers who bombed Yugoslavia'. Smirnov (2000)

⁵ Ross (2006) 39

⁶ Two notable exceptions during this period were the Moscow Art Theatre's staging of both Elena Gremina's *Behind The Mirror* (*Za Zerkalom*, 1994) and Oleg Bogaev's *The Russian National Postal Service* (*Russkaya Narodnaya Pochta*, 1995) in 1994 and 1998 respectively.

series.⁷

It was not until the creation of spaces such as Teatr.doc and the Playwright and Director Centre at the turn of the millennium that provided writers a creative outlet to stage their own productions, develop their craft through rehearsed readings, and the opportunity to establish a dialogue with their coevals in the theatre scene. The need for the creation of new theatres to accommodate the rise in new writing goes beyond the financial implications on the theatre scene as a result of the collapse of communism in Russia. Historically, training for directors and actors in Russian theatre schools has focused on classic texts, and the fostering of a dialogue with active playwrights has never been a priority in the formal education of young directors⁸. Duška Radosavljević further makes the point that Russian theatre directors have a much less text-centered approach to theatre making than, for example, their associates in the United Kingdom⁹. These combined factors have long resulted in Russian directors assuming the role of auteurs, whose control and authority over the production is unquestioned. Director Yuri Liubimov has articulated this, arguing that ‘the director must ensure both the construction and the articulation of the production himself’.¹⁰

It was in this artistic climate, immediately after the collapse of communism, that a narrative emerged among cultural critics that new theatre writing ceased to exist in Russia. Russian theatre scholar Mikhail Shvydkoy, dates the start of this perceived theatrical period of transition back to Mikhail Gorbachev’s *perestroika* policies:

after the launching of a *perestroika* in theatre, certain voices were heard asking, ‘But where are the masterpieces? Why is it that after four years of unconstrained activity the theatre has produced fewer outstanding plays?’ It appears as if some of my colleagues are beginning to create a theory about how the quality of theatre was better during the stagnation period.¹¹

Shvydkoy argues that the dearth in the writing of new plays that followed the *perestroika* of the mid 1980s was the result of a generation of leading playwrights

⁷ Yuri Kaldiev and Vyacheslav Durnenkov were involved in the writing of the controversial show *School*, while Gremina has continued to write for television to help fund Teatr.doc.

⁸ Ross (2006) 31.

⁹ Radosavljević (2013) 53.

¹⁰ Liubimov in Beumers (1997) 6.

¹¹ Shvidkoi (1989) 10.

including Alexander Gelman, Liudmila Petrushevskaja, Alexei Kazantsev, and Alexander Galin ‘pausing to look around’, and ‘like all other Soviet people [...] winning the rights necessary for a full participation in public life beyond the realm of their professional work’.¹² Thus, an established narrative had already arisen that proclaimed the death of the playwright in Russian theatre even prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and that the interlude in playwriting that occurred in the 1990s was, at least partially, a lingering result of the policy of *perestroika*.

John Freedman observes that a ‘myth’ has arisen about the perceived stagnation in the Russian theatre in the late 1980s and 1990s.¹³ Freedman notes that: ‘the 1990s in Russia were a time when it was the fashion to proclaim everything theatrical dead. There were, the pundits said, no new directors, no new actors, no theatres worth attending and certainly no new writers worth staging.’¹⁴ This can partly be explained by the rescinding of state censorship that provoked an explosion in the consumption of art that had previously been banned in the Soviet Union, resulting in new artistic and theatrical developments becoming overlooked. As academic of Slavonic studies Helene Melat argues: ‘during the first years following the Soviet era, the conventional forms of literature dissolved and diversified: perhaps the most striking phenomenon was the sudden emergence of popular culture on a very large scale. Hitherto banned, or severely restricted, literary experiments flourished.’¹⁵ Indeed, the 1990s was an important period in the development of new theatre writing, and the burgeoning of what would become known as New Drama. In 1991 the playwrights Gremina, Alexi Kazantsev, and Mikhail Roshchin established the annual Liubimovka New Play Festival. Throughout the decade, the event grew, nurturing many talents who would become synonymous with the New Drama. The 1997 Liubimovka marked one of the paramount moments of the cumulative new writing movement in Russia. Freedman has called the 1997 festival at Liubimovka a catalyzing event that united individuals, theatrical styles, and geographical locations. Freedman claims that ‘it provided a legitimate break separating what came “before” from what came “after”’. From this point on, Russia’s theatre community could no longer look at developments in the field of drama as a random string of disparate and insolated incidents; subsequently, each individual development had to be understood

¹² Ibid. 11.

¹³ Freedman (1997) xiv.

¹⁴ Freedman (2006) 18.

¹⁵ Melat (2013) 78-9.

within the context of a greater whole'.¹⁶

The festival hosted the inaugural readings of Olga Mukhina's *YoU* (1997), and Oleg Bogaev's *The Russian National Post Service* (*Russkaya Narodnaya Pochta*, 1995). *YoU* is a scathing expose of the vacuous nihilism of middle class Moscow during the Yeltsin era. The play is set during the contemporary events of the First Chechen War during the mid-1990s, and depicts a young conscript soldier named Nikolai in his final days of leave before returning to the front line. Mukhina interrogates the indifference and acquiescence of the Muscovite characters to the war that envelops their everyday life through radio broadcasts and newspaper reports. *The Russian National Post Service* is a play about an elderly war veteran falling into senility, whose only contact with the outside world is the correspondence he believes he keeps with his old army comrades, Boris Yeltsin, and Elizabeth II. Bogaev's play directly engages with the social and political reality of Yeltsin's Russia. As political scientist Andrea Chandler argues, pensioners became increasingly marginalised and impoverished in the 1990s as their living standards were eroded by the new economic policies implemented after the end of communism.¹⁷ In their portrayal of contemporary Russian life and social issues, *YoU* and *The Russian National Post Service* were key plays in developing the thematics of New Drama. Their staging of individuals excluded from the normative public sphere, raising questions of who is culpable for the effects of political decisions on the most vulnerable members of Russian society.

Another important development in the emergence of New Drama in 1990s was the founding of festival and performance spaces across the country by playwrights who aimed to promote new theatre writing. In 1994 Nikolai Kolyada founded a playwriting course at the Yekaterinburg State Theatre Institute with the intention of galvanising a new generation of playwrights to experiment with theatrical conventions and language, providing them with the space to produce rehearsed readings. Kolyada's graduates include Bogaev, as well as two of the writers considered in depth in this thesis, Vassily Sigarev and Polina Borodina. In Togliatti, in the south of Russia, the inaugural 'May Readings' festival was organised by playwright Vadim Levanov at the Golosova 20 theatre centre in 1999. The festival similarly provided a platform for young participants interested in theatre writing, and

¹⁶ Freedman (2010b) 393-5

¹⁷ Chandler (2004) 60-71.

resulted in the discovery of three of the vanguards of New Drama, the brothers Mikhail and Vyacheslav Durnenkov, and Yuri Klavdiev, who subsequently became known as the 'Togliatti phenomenon'. Finally, in Moscow Alexi Kazantsev, and Mikhail Roshchin opened the Playwright and Director's Centre (CDR) in 1998, a space dedicated to producing new writing.

Finally, it is also clear that during the 1990s the recognition given to new theatre writing grew. One explicit reason for the rising profile of new writing was the establishment of Russian literary award the Anti-Booker Prize in 1995. The Anti-Booker was an annual award staged by the daily broadsheet newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* between 1995 and 2001 as contra to the British-sponsored Russian Booker Prize. In 1997 the Anti-Booker introduced a new stage play category awarded to the author of a new production. The Anti-Booker played a prominent role in bringing wide spread national attention to the new plays being produced in Russia in the 1990s, and emphasised the role of the playwright in the artistic process of producing a play. The award helped challenge the artistic status quo, and provoked the general public to challenge their ideas about the role of theatre in post-Soviet Russia. The winners of the prize in the 1990s, Bogaev, Maksim Kurochkin, and Evgeni Grishkovets, gained notoriety and facilitated a demand for the publication of their plays and similar texts. Notably, Grishkovets found widespread fame and critical success after receiving the award in 1999. He achieved something of a celebrity status at the turn of the millennium, appearing on talk shows, performing in films, and releasing recordings his one-man performances on DVD. Furthermore, the Anti-Booker prize marks an early connection between New Drama and Putinism. Owner of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, Boris Berezovsky, is a vocal critic of Putin, whose media-empire had adopted a strongly polemical stance toward the Kremlin since 2000.

Although the new theatre writing in the 1990s did not gain great recognition until the end of the decade, it is apparent that the decade was important in laying the artistic and cultural groundwork for the emergence of New Drama at the turn of the millennium. The establishment of playwriting schools, festivals, and dedicated new writing venues provided exciting opportunities for young playwrights to have their work performed in either rehearsed readings or full scale productions. The recognition of playwrights through awards such as the Anti-Booker and the Golden Mask also facilitated a renewed interest in new dramatic texts, and helped to codify the new works being produced in Russia. In the next section, I will consider another vital

factor in the emergence of New Drama.

The Royal Court in Russia

In the 1980s the influence of the British Council in Russia was at an all time low. Diminishing Anglo-Russian relations, combined with a sharp reduction in government funding to the British Council as a result of the Berrill Report of 1977, resulted in the closure of the Moscow office. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, however, resulted in a bolstering of relations between Russia and the West, and saw growing demand for English-language culture throughout the former Soviet Union. This resulted in a dramatic rise in funding from the British Council in Russia, and in 1992 they opened their first information centre in Moscow. In 1995 Sasha Dugdale was appointed as head of Council's art commission, and her introduction to playwrights Gremina and Kazantsev in 1998 set the course for a series of events that changed how the role of the playwright was perceived in Russian.

The late 1990s saw the acquaintance of Russian theatre makers with contemporary 'In-Yer-Face' Theatre, synonymous with the Royal Court Theatre in London. This was precipitated by funding from the British Council, who paid for Russian-language translations of the plays and their publication. In 1999 the CDR staged Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) in a production directed by Olga Subbotina and translated by playwright Alexander Rodionov, and in 2003 *Some Explicit Polaroids* (1999) was directed by Kirill Serebrennikov on the small stage of the Pushkin Theatre in Moscow.

In 1998, inspired by the British 'In-Yer-Face' theatre phenomenon, Elena Gremina and Sasha Dugdale of the British Council in Moscow contacted the Royal Court Theatre's International Department and invited them to visit Russia in the hope of forging a relationship between Russia's new generation of playwrights, and an internationally recognised venue for new writing. The resulting workshops and lectures organised by the Royal Court across Russia in the subsequent years would have an impact on new theatre writing in Russia that few commentators would have predicted at the time.¹⁸ This influence was twofold: young Russian playwrights drew creativity from both the 'In-Yer-Face' theatre of writers such as Mark Ravenhill and

¹⁸ For example, Beumers and Lipovetsky have noted that: 'the Royal Court carried out similar seminars in almost every European (and not only European) country but only in Eastern Europe (mainly in Poland and in the countries of the former Yugoslavia) the "export" of verbatim has had a similar impact as Russia.' Beumers and Lipovetsky (2009) 212.

Sarah Kane, and also from the techniques of documentary and verbatim theatre imparted to them at the Royal Court's seminars. The Russian newspapers and critics who covered the theatre writing boom in Russia in the early 2000s made little distinction between these two styles, instead discussing the plays under the umbrella term of New Drama. For the critics, the binary in Britain between 'In-Yer-Face' and documentary theatre was overlooked, arguably because theatres staged both documentary and non-documentary productions and Russian playwrights experimented with multiple theatrical forms. Instead, the critics spoke in general terms about the 'Royal Court phenomenon' and its influence on Russian dramatists.

Gremina and Dugdale's arrangement with Elyse Dodgson of the Royal Court's International Department to stage a series of seminars for young playwrights and directors in Russia came to fruition in 1999. The first event was held in Moscow in February 1999. Graham Whybrow, the literary manager at the Royal Court, gave a talk on the working practices of the theatre. Whybrow made the point that the playwright was an integral part of the creative process at the Royal Court, and was consulted on the choice of director and the casting process, and had the right to attend the rehearsals of the production. This was a revelation to the young playwrights in attendance who had previously only worked with Russian directors who frequently edited and re-wrote plays, and often banned writers from attending their own rehearsals.¹⁹ In July 1999 a first week-long seminar was held in Moscow, run by Royal Court representatives Dodgson, playwright Meredith Oakes, and director Mary Peate. The seminar focused on how to exploit the world around the playwright, and the language of real people. It was attended by a burgeoning group of young writers, including Kurochkin and Grishkovets. The short pieces produced by the playwrights at the workshop were subsequently performed at the Playwright and Director Center in Moscow, and then at the Royal Court's International season under the collective title *Moscow – Open City* (1999). As a direct result of the work he produced at the seminar, Kurochkin was commissioned to write the full-length play *Kitchen* (*Kukhnya*, 2000), under the direction of Oleg Menshikov.

One of the Royal Court productions that was discussed during these initial lectures was Stephen Daldry's verbatim play *Body Talk* (1996), a dramatisation of candid interviews with men discussing their relationship to their bodies, staged

¹⁹ Alexander Rodionov and Kurochkin have recalled their thoughts on the challenging and provocative subject of Whybrow's lecture. See Rodionov and Kurochkin (2015).

upstairs at the Royal Court in July 1996. Although the events introduced the participants to a multiplicity of approaches to new writing, the playwrights in attendance - in particular, Gremina and Ugarov - were captivated by the concept of verbatim theatre and invited the Royal Court to return to Moscow in April 2000 to hold a further, three-day seminar, exclusively on the verbatim technique. This time, Dodgson was accompanied by Stephen Daldry, James Macdonald, Ramin Grey, and playwright Stephen Jeffreys. During the workshop, Daldry described the process of creating verbatim theatre:

At the beginning of a project you know neither the theme nor the characters: you only have a subject that you study. You have to rely on the fact that the process will lead you to the theme, the characters, the plot, and structure. If you tried to determine this in advance, you would not listen [to the interviewee]. The process is pretty intimidating because you're starting from scratch, and there is a possibility you will end up with no results, but you have to trust yourself, trust the subject, and - most importantly - to trust the people who you interview.²⁰

The participants – including Elena Isaeva, Alexander Rodionov, Kseniia Dragunskaja, Kurochkin, and Grishkovets - were dispatched to interview the homeless at metro stations and underpasses. These initial experiments with the verbatim technique formed the basis of Teatr.doc's early productions, including Rodionov's *War Of The Moldovans For A Cardboard Box* (*Voyna Moldavan za Kartonnuyu Korobku*, 2003). Gremina and Ugarov recorded the seminar and sent it to colleagues and theatre schools across the country. Soon the technique had disseminated across Russia, and was being employed by the Babii Company in Cheliabinsk, and Theatre Lozha from Kemerovo.

In his article 'What is Verbatim?', published on Teatr.doc's website, Ugarov allies Russian documentary theatre of the 2000s with the international trend for documentary and fact-based theatre practices that emerged after the Second World War including:

²⁰ This statement is quoted by Ugarov in his article 'What Is Verbatim?' See Ugarov (2012).

English verbatim [...] the solo performances of Anna Deavere Smith in the early nineties [and] *The Vagina Monologues* (1996) by Eve Ensler.²¹

By recalling a wide range of international productions and theatre makers, Ugarov invites comparisons between contemporary Russian verbatim and its European and North American predecessors, while also acknowledging the wide ranging influences on Teatr.doc that accounts for their diverse employment of verbatim techniques.

The Royal Court's verbatim productions in the 1990s were part of a larger resurgence of 'theatre of the real' by British practitioners at the turn of the millennium. During this decade, the Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn, under the artistic direction of Nicolas Kent, produced a number of tribunal theatre pieces in collaboration with *Guardian* journalist Richard Norton-Taylor. These included the dramatisation of the Scott Arms-to-Iraq Inquiry *Half the Picture* (1994), and *The Colour of Justice* (1999), which was created using the transcripts of the Macpherson Report into the death of Stephen Lawrence. The British tribunal plays of the 1990s and 2000s had an international precedent in the documentary theatre that emerged in West Germany in the 1960s. Directors and playwrights including Peter Weiss, Heinar Kipphardt, and Rolf Hochhuth created productions that re-enacted historical documents as a means of publicly interrogating both the historical past and contemporary global politics. The German documentary plays of the 1960s included Weiss's production *The Investigation* (1965), which utilised the documentation and reports from the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials that ran from 1963 to 1965, staging them in a courtroom setting.²² In their interrogation of the Russian legal system, Teatr.doc draw upon elements of tribunal theatre, recalling theatre scholar Chris Megson's definition of tribunal theatre as 'the form of a forensic simulation of the inquiry's disputations and setting, with actors playing the roles of the actual witnesses and judicial personnel'.²³ The staging of these productions, however, departs from Paget's delineation that 'where tribunal theatre is concerned, *mise-en-scène* and acting style alike must be realistic, and 'authentic' in that space'.²⁴ At Teatr.doc, the actors do not attempt an 'authentic' performance style when depicting the real life individuals featured in the plays. Instead they casually dress in their own street clothes and

²¹ Ugarov (2012).

²² See Irmer (2006).

²³ Megson (2009) 195.

²⁴ Paget (2008) 137.

deliver their lines directly to the audience with little emotion or emphasis, conforming to the theatre's famous aphorism 'Theatre With No Acting'

Arguably, the most important development to occur as a result of the Royal Court's workshops in Moscow in 1999 and 2000, was the founding of Teatr.doc by a group of playwrights led by Ugarov and Gremina in February 2002. Teatr.doc's original space was located on Trekhprudny Pereulok in the Tverskoy district on central Moscow. The performance space was located in the basement of a residential housing block, and was arguably an archetypal black box space. The technical aspects of the space are limited, with the theatre making use of only twelve lights and a projector.²⁵ In the year it was founded, Teatr.doc co-hosted the inaugural New Drama Festival in May and June. The festival was organised by Gremina and Ugarov along with Eduard Boiakov, then director of the respected Golden Mask Festival, Sasha Dugdale of the British Council, and the Moscow Arts Theatre, as a means to promote and discover new playwriting talent. Anatoly Smeliansky, the deputy artistic director of the Moscow Arts Theatre acted as the jury chairman at the initial event in 2002. The festival proved significant in providing a platform for young playwrights to be performed, and was instrumental in helping many artists make the transition into mainstream theatre, and some of the plays staged in 2002 entered Teatr.doc's early repertoire.

Furthermore the seminars held by the Royal Court galvanized existing writers into exploring new creative outlets, and were significant in assembling a group of like-minded writers inspired by the ethos and playwriting techniques of the London theatre, leading to the foundation of new venues in Russia dedicated to staging new writing. As well as discovering new playwrights, the Royal Court visits brought exposure to more established writers, resulting in the increased staging of new writing at more established venues such as the Moscow Arts Theatre. The Royal Court also provided New Drama writers with opportunities to have their plays performed at the theatre's space in London. For example, between 2002 and 2004, three plays by Vasily Sigarev were performed at the Royal Court's Jerwood Theatre Upstairs. Sigarev's play *Plasticine* was first foreign winner of the *Evening Standard's* Charles Wintour Award for most promising playwright, which brought Sigarev greater

²⁵ Gremina (2004) 3.

acclaim in the west, and served to highlight the emergence of New Drama outside of Russia.

At this point, it is worth reflecting on the reception of the Royal Court's visits to Russia. Many Russian critics and commentators have denied the international influence and the Royal Court's impact on the ascendance of documentary theatre techniques in Russia in the 2000s. Instead, they attempt to claim a stake in the cultural ownership and genealogy of the genre, arguing that its origins could be traced back to pre-existing dramatic traditions originally developed in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. The desire to entrench Russian verbatim and New Drama in the tradition of Russian theatre and culture betrays an anxiety over the perceived influx of foreign theatre from the West, and in particular the United Kingdom. In a country where Western influence is often treated with mistrust and the Russian theatrical tradition is a source of national pride, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is a backlash towards the Royal Court's influence on young Russian playwrights. Theatre critic Marina Timasheva argues that any claim by the British to inventing the documentary theatre genre was remarkably naive, recalling Soviet playwright Nikolai Pogodin, and the *agitprop* of the Blue Blouse theatre troupe in the 1920s and 1930s.²⁶ Similarly, theatre director Vladimir Mirzoev draws parallels between twenty-first century Russia documentary theatre and Proletkult performances that coincided with the 1917 Revolution.²⁷ As I shall argue throughout this thesis, however, the political nature of New Drama differs from the strongly polemical productions staged by the revolutionary agitprop theatre and Blue Blouse groups. While Blue Blouse theatre was created with the aim of promoting the benefits of communism, New Drama does not frame its opposition stance to the Putin regime within a specific political ideology. Instead, New Drama practitioners aim to provoke a wider dialogue on the nature of Russian politics in general.

The subsequent cultural backlash against the influence of the Royal Court, which labelled New Drama as a theatrical movement inspired by foreign practitioners and bankrolled by British institutions instigates an important consideration on New Drama's global outlook. Despite a rich history of transnational exchange and collaborations between Russian theatre practitioners and their foreign peers, it can be

²⁶ Timasheva (2002). The editor of *Teatr* journal, Marina Davidova, makes a similar assertion that the origins of documentary theatre can be traced back to the Soviet revolutionary theatre of the 1920s. See Davidova (2015).

²⁷ Mirzoev (2004).

argued that Russia's varied performance traditions and its eminence in the evolution of twentieth century dramaturgy has been a longstanding source of national pride throughout the country.²⁸ Covering the opening night of Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (*Vesna Sviashchennaia*, 1913) at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris in May 1913, Russian critic Nikolai Kostilyov wrote in the pages of newspaper *Russkaia Molva* that in the realm of dramatic art 'Russians have turned out to occupy the first place. This is an undeniable strength and we can only take pride in it.'²⁹ The vehement derogation of New Drama as a theatre of foreign influence and Western cultural imperialism by some critics juxtaposed with attempts to situate the movement into the pre-existing Russian tradition demonstrates that in part, the endurance of a nationalistic attachment to Russia's theatre traditions and achievements.

Putin's own political discourse displays a comparative nationalistic attitude towards art and cultural as an integral reinforcement of traditional Russian values. In April 2014, the Culture Ministry published a report entitled 'Foundations of State Cultural Politics', which subsequently appeared in broadsheet newspaper *Izvestia*. Putin prefaced its publication by calling for the rejection of foreign influence in Russian culture, proclaiming that 'in Russian society, it is necessary to form the kind of culture and values which could buttress our history and traditions, unite times and generations and allow for the consolidation of the nation'.³⁰ The document argued for the eschewal of culture alien to the national and cultural features of Russia and a rejection of the principles of multiculturalism on the grounds that 'Russia is not Europe'.³¹ Additionally, the article sent a warning to contemporary artists that 'experimentation' could not justify an attack on the 'traditional values' of Russian society.³² This manifesto was put into practice in March 2015, when Boris Mezdrich, executive director of Russia's largest opera theatre, the Novosibirsk State Academy Opera and Ballet Theatre was fired after complaints by activists from the Orthodox Church who deemed the theatre's production of Richard Wagner's *Tannhauser* (1845) offensive to Russia's religious heritage. In summer 2014, the Duma imposed a ban on the use of *mat* (vulgar language and swearing) in theatre, film, literature, and

²⁸ For evidence of the long-standing historical transmission of ideas between Russian and British theatre makers see theatre scholar Jonathan Pitches's edited book *Russians in Britain: British Theatre and the Russian Tradition of Actor Training*.

²⁹ Cited in Taruskin (1996) 1010.

³⁰ Golubock (2014)

³¹ *Izvestia* (2014)

³² *Ibid.*

the media.³³ The fact that the law was passed in the same month as a similar decree banning the use of foreign words in Russian vernacular positioned the ruling on *mat* as a continuation of Putin's nationalistic stand against undesirable aspects of Western influence in Russian culture and art.

Scholar of Russian politics Robert Horvath has further identified that 'the Putin regime's authoritarian reforms during 2005-2007 were a defensive move to protect Russian sovereignty from Western influence'.³⁴ Horvath argues that the Kremlin and pro-Putin supporters identified the success of the 'coloured revolutions' in Georgia and the Ukraine in 2003-2005 as due to the intervention and funding of Western institutions and NGOs. The Putin regime's depiction of NGOs and protests movements as the agents of Western propaganda and geopolitical interests reflects the fears of Russian critics who saw New Drama as theatre of foreign influence. The imposition of controls on NGOs has impacted on the staging of New Drama, most notably in December 2014 when the Sakharov Centre was labeled a 'foreign agent' under the newly introduced Russian foreign agent law that required NGOs receiving foreign financial support to officially register themselves as 'foreign agents'. The Sakharov Centre, which has staged a number of documentary plays, including *Grandchildren. The Second Act (Vtoroi akt. Vnuki, 2012)* by Alexandra Polivanova and Mikhail Kaluzhsky, was subsequently fined 400,000 rubles for failing to declaring itself a 'foreign agent' in September the following year.³⁵

The international outlook of many New Drama practitioners remains in conflict with the Kremlin's nationalistic policies and discourse on Russian culture and the arts. Of the eight case studies discussed in this thesis, four have been performed abroad in the UK: *Plasticine* and *Black Milk* at the Royal Court in 2002 and 2003 respectively, *The Drunks* premièred at the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2009, and in 2012 *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* was staged by Sputnik Theatre Company at the New Diorama theatre in London. In addition to the collaborations with the Royal Court, many other leading New Drama productions have been performed at festivals

³³ While the sweeping ban covered a wide variety of art forms in Russia, it has been noted that the act explicitly targeted theatres with New Drama plays in their repertoire due to the prevalence of *mat* in many productions. For example, see Kiselev (2014). The only venue to defy the ban and continue to stage performances with the uncensored use of *mat* was Teatr.doc.

³⁴ Horvath (2013) 1.

³⁵ In a separate incident, Moscow Police interrupted a performance of the documentary play *Moscow Trials (Moskovskiye protsessy, 2013)* at the Sakharov Centre. Officials delayed the performance of the piece that, in part, dramatised the trial of Pussy Riot to check the visa of the play's Swiss director Milo Rau.

in Europe and the United States and playwrights have participated in further international collaborations. For example in summer 2012 Mikhail Durnenkov, Pavel Pryazhko, and Natalya Vorozhbit were invited to New York City by the Public Theatre to produce a series of plays entitled *The Boardwalk Trilogy* (2012) that examined the community of Russians emigrants living in Brighton Beach.

In this way, New Drama practitioners have attempted to resist Putin's neo-Slavophile ideology and his promotion of nationalist patriotism. The forging of strong and enduring transnational relationships with theatres abroad underscores the international outlook of New Drama writers. Although New Drama is primarily concerned with the amplification of marginalised voices and the articulation of salient political anxieties at national or even local level, the effect of theatrical transmission on the development of new playwriting in twenty-first century Russia is important to acknowledge. The international dimension of New Drama further moves beyond theatrical and aesthetic considerations. The staging of these plays internationally attempts to raise the awareness of social and political issues in contemporary Russia abroad, as well as foregrounding the authoritarian repression of marginalised voices by the Putin regime to a global audience.

Historical Precedents: Liudmila Petrushevskaja

I contend that an important historical precedent for New Drama is playwright Liudmila Petrushevskaja. Petrushevskaja has been previously cited as exhibiting the rudimentary aesthetics and preoccupations of the New Drama movement. Petrushevskaja is considered a member of the 'post-Vampilov' group of playwrights active during the stagnation period of the 1970s and 80s.³⁶ Although she wrote prolifically throughout the 1970s, as a result of not being an officially sanctioned playwright she was not professionally staged until December 1980, when Yuri Liubimov directed her one-act play *Love (Liubov)* at the Taganka Theatre in Moscow.

Russian critic Alena Solntseva suggests that Petrushevskaja is the only playwright from the previous generation to reflect the language and motifs of New Drama.³⁷ Journalist Pavel Rudnev writes that 'the approach that Petrushevskaja rejected was picked up by the playwrights of the new millennium, who were inclined

³⁶ The post-Vampilov playwrights were influenced by the themes and linguistics of Soviet playwright Alexander Vampilov.

³⁷ Solntseva in 'Otkasatsia...' (2004)

to document and record carefully some inmost corners of reality without ironing out the everyday language, admiring instead the roughness of threadbare speech.³⁸ In addition, Vyrypaev has suggested, that had her plays been written during the twenty-first century, Petrushevskaja would have found a home at Teatr.doc.³⁹ Beumers and Lipovetsky also state the importance of Petrushevskaja's influence on New Drama, noting that the new playwrights of the twenty-first century have taken from her the dramatic language and the everyday absurdity displayed in her plays.⁴⁰

A key scholarly argument on Petrushevskaja's drama is its relation to the aesthetics of the Theatre of the Absurd. In her monograph on Petrushevskaja's theatre, Katy Simmons argues that:

of all the Western European Absurdist, Petrushevskaja's work is perhaps most similar to Harold Pinter's: both place their plays firmly in contemporary society, but neither can be described as a social realist, because the problems that they concern themselves with are not the soluble, inessential ones of everyday life, but questions of the survival of self, which Pinter describes as more real than social realism with its didactic solutions.⁴¹

Elements of the Absurd in Petrushevskaja's plays are also noted by Nina Kolesnikoff, and Melissa Smith, the latter suggests that 'an undercurrent of the absurd and the grotesque runs throughout Petrushevskaja's works'.⁴² Contrary to this is Stephen Mulrine's conclusion that 'Petrushevskaja is an unashamed realist: her work is almost wholly devoid of non-naturalistic devices'.⁴³ These two contrasting readings of Petrushevskaja's theatre have been coalesced by Beumers and Lipovetsky who proclaim that 'the paradox and novelty of Petrushevskaja's language lies precisely in a combination of fine, realistic psychologism with the poetic of the absurd'.⁴⁴

Although, as Beumers and Lipovetsky point out, Petrushevskaja experimented with elements of the Absurd, her plays are rooted in the reality of modern day Soviet life during the era of stagnation under Leonid Brezhnev. Central to many of her plays

³⁸ Rudnev (2004)

³⁹ Vyrypaev (2004)

⁴⁰ Beumers and Lipovetsky (2009) 75-89

⁴¹ Simmons (1992) 2-3

⁴² Smith (1994) 197-8

⁴³ Mulrine (1991) viii

⁴⁴ Beumers and Lipovetsky (2009) 75

is the character of the single, older mother, widowed by the Second World War, and the children raised in matriarchal family units – the generation that came of age during the period of stagnation. Petrushevskaja brought to the stage an alternative voice that contrasted with the official depiction of life in Russia propagated by the Soviet regime. She portrays characters who are unable to operate in the realm of ‘normal’ Soviet society, such as the alcoholics in *Cinzano* (1973).

Conclusion

The influence of the Royal Court and global trends in documentary theatre making as well as the long lineage of fact and reality based theatre in Russia are all significant factors in the development of verbatim techniques in the 2000s. Russian documentary theatre of the 2000s draws from a hybrid of reality based theatrical forms, including verbatim techniques imparted by the Royal Court’s workshops, tribunal theatre, as well as Russian realism and the political theatre of the inter-war years. It is impossible, however, to tie the documentary productions of the 2000s to one theatrical form. Instead, I contend that in the genealogy of New Drama there are a number of theatrical lineages. Alongside the Royal Court, the emergence of a number of new playwrighting talents, the founding of dramaturgical awards, and the establishment festivals and spaces dedicated to staging new writing all provided a fertile ground for the emergence of New Drama at the turn of the millennium. Furthermore, I acknowledge the important influence of the theatre of Petrushevskaja, whose linguistic and thematic concerns about contemporary life in the Soviet Union have been recognised as an inspiration by a number of New Drama writers.

In the next chapter, I will turn my attention to Putin himself, and how theatre makers have satirised his public performances and media image. Focusing on Varvara Faer’s *BerlusPutin* (2012) and Viktor Teterin’s *Putin.doc* (2005), I will explore how satirical images of Putin in New Drama have developed during his presidency. I contend that *BerlusPutin* insists that attending a theatrical performance at Teatr.doc is a direct extension of the opposition protests of 2011-12.

Chapter Two: Putin on Stage: Varvara Faer's *BerlusPutin* and Viktor Teterin's *Putin.doc*

Introduction

In her book *Jokes and Their Relationship to Society*, anthropologist Christine Davis contends that once Russians had freedom of speech in the late 1980s they 'stopped joking', suggesting that the use of satire was lost during the transformation from Soviet dictatorship to democracy.¹ Satire, which had been a popular literary and theatrical mode during the Soviet Union, did indeed suffer a downturn in the 1990s, which could possibly be explained by writers looking instead at experimenting with previously banned genres of art and literature such as post-modernism and *chernukha*. This chapter considers the revival of political satire and its relationship to the Putin regime, specifically Putin's own public persona and the wave of oppositional demonstrations that took place across Russia in the winter of 2011 and 2012.

This chapter aims to examine how playwrights subvert and disrupt the administration through the trope of satire, which mocks and opposes the normative representation of Putin as promulgated by the Kremlin and the official state-sanctioned media. Extant scholarship on the satirical treatment of Putin is limited. In her article 'Putin and Emptiness: The Place of Satire in the Contemporary Cult of Personality', Slavonic scholar Emily Johnson argues that Putin's public performances and the creation of an official narrative that supports his media persona is 'more about the act of worship than the godhead, per se'.² Johnson contends that the satirical treatment of Putin is motivated by a self-aware praise and adulation of the president, rather than a serious attempt to undermine the autocracy of Putinism. To date, no study has been made into the role played by satire in the Russian theatre during the Putin era. By considering New Drama's satirical treatment of Putin I aim to define new territory for the role of political satire in contemporary Russia and demonstrate that in a performance context it is still a highly relevant and important medium.

The case studies for this chapter are Varvara Faer's *BerlusPutin* (2012) and Viktor Teterin's *Putin.doc*. *BerlusPutin* has run at Teatr.doc for over five years, and is arguably one of the most provocative and controversial plays in the theatre's repertoire. The performance is one of a few in Russia to represent Putin on stage in a

¹ Davis (1998) 82.

² Johnson (2009) 5.

critical light, using biographical material and popular cultural references to define his character. A methodical challenge with the consideration of *BerlusPutin* in this thesis is that the production is centered on a basic framework and plot, with the actors freshly editing and updating the script with Faer for each new run of the production at the theatre. In a conversation with me in 2014 Faer estimated that there were already around 50 different versions of the text.³ In order to address this, my analysis of *BerlusPutin* is informed by numerous visits to see the show at Teatr.doc between 2013 and 2015, as well as watching archived video recordings of other performances. *Putin.doc* premièred at the KC Home Theatre in 2005, and was published in a Russian-language anthology of new plays edited by Pavel Rudnev - the translation I use in this chapter is my own.

In my consideration of the contrasting use of satire in *BerlusPutin* and *Putin.doc*, it is important to define the use of the term satire in this chapter. In an interview given prior to the opening of *BerlusPutin* at Teatr.doc, Faer states that the production fits within the tradition of western political satire and claims that her intention for the production is to create laughter among the audience: '[Laughter] is a strong weapon against the powers, against inflated and hypocritical ghouls. Laughter is a very powerful weapon that attacks all arrogance.'⁴ The language used by Faer here implies her disdain for Putin and his entourage, and reveals the anger that influences her satirical approach in *BerlusPutin*. In her assertion that the satirist's primary weapon against their targets is the evocation of humour and laughter, Faer draws an important comparison between her production and traditional definitions of the satiric mode as defined by scholar Matthew Hodgart in his book *Satire: Origins and Principles*, who writes that 'the satirist's anger is modified by his sense of superiority and contempt for his victim; his aim is to make the victim lose "face", and the most effective way of humiliating him is by contemptuous laughter'.⁵

Hodgart's definition of satire is important because it foregrounds the political dimension it can take and its ability to subvert contentious political figures: 'there is an essential connection between satire and politics in the widest sense: satire is not only the commonest form of political literature, but, insofar as it tries to influence

³ Faer (2014).

⁴ Shary (2011).

⁵ Hodgart (2010) 7.

public behaviour, it is the most political part of all literature.’⁶ Hodgart’s argument that the foundations of satire are found in its engagement with the political further underscores that for satire to be effective and persuasive, it needs to speak to contemporary political concerns and anxieties. Gilbert Highet has also observed this important facet of satire in his seminal study *The Anatomy of Satire*. He writes that ‘we can say that the type of subject preferred by satire is always concrete, usually topical, often personal. It deals with actual cases, mentions real people by name or describes them unmistakably (and often unflatteringly), talk of this moment and this city, and this special, very recent, very fresh deposit of corruption.’⁷ In other words, satire is at its most efficacious when targeting current events and individuals who are immediately recognisable to the satirist’s audience. Indeed, as Faer states, the ability of *BerlusPutin* to be urgent and relevant is a vital proponent of the show and its comic satire against Putin. Faer underscores this point by stating that she regularly updates the script to include topical news reports, jokes, and Internet memes circulating about Putin.⁸

Satire can therefore be defined as a genre that holds a unique political dimension that privileges the satirist as a commentator on contemporary social and political developments who aims to subvert their targets through the power of humour and laughter. The two plays considered here both conform to this definition of satire, but as this chapter demonstrates satire can still take distinctly different forms and approaches in its treatment of contemporary political events. In this chapter I draw on two disparate forms of satiric comedy – Juvenalian and Horatian – to consider how satirical treatment of Putin has shifted during his presidency.

My consideration of these plays in this chapter is twofold. Firstly, I argue that satirical treatment of Putin and Putinism in the twenty-first century has evolved, while the focus on satirical targets has sifted. In my consideration of this point I use Holbert *et al.*’s observations that satire is not a fixed genre and is instead ‘comprised of a variety of distinctive techniques and modes.’⁹ Secondly, I contend that *BerlusPutin* uses political satire to facilitate a wider discussion of the anti-Putin protest movement that emerged in 2011 and 2012. In this way, I consider how New Drama engages with the oppositional discourse against the Putin regime.

⁶ Ibid. 33.

⁷ Highet (1962) 16.

⁸ Faer (2014).

⁹ Holbert *et al.* (2008) 192.

This chapter starts with a wider consideration of Putinism. Following from this, I engage in a more specific discussion of how Putin's own public performance and media persona forms an important part of Putinism and his success with the Russian electorate, further considering how Putin has been depicted in other art forms in Russia. Next, I examine *BerlusPutin*. Through detailed performance analysis I examine how satire of Putin facilitates a wider consideration of the role played by theatre and *Teatr.doc* in the opposition towards Putin. In the final section of this chapter I examine *Putin.doc* in the context of *BerlusPutin* to consider how political satire has developed in Putin's Russia.

Putin and Putinism

When Boris Yeltsin ceded the Russian presidency on 31 December 1999 the mood in Russia was buoyant.¹⁰ As Russian scholar Eliot Borenstein notes, 'the Yeltsin years considerably lowered the bar [of public expectation] for the country's next leader', and Anders Aslund chronicles that many Russians were happy to see the departure of a leader who they felt had become an incompetent alcoholic and an embarrassment to the nation on the international stage.¹¹ Despite the momentum behind Putin, the first months of his premiership were tentative and his perceived lack of charisma amongst the Russian electorate was a matter of concern for the new president and his public relations team.¹² In particular, the news coverage of the Kursk submarine tragedy in August 2000 highlighted Putin's enervated charisma and the importance of the media to his long-term success. Sixteen years later, the Kremlin's subsequent creation of a prevailing public persona for Putin has proved to be highly successful and propitious, to the extent that Putin has become the totemic representation of Russia's revivification after the collapse of Communism.

It is clear that an important part of Putin's success at the polling booth is agnate with the contrived public image and persona he has constructed for himself. In their meticulous study of Putin's public image, Stephen White and Ian McAllister note that in a survey of Muscovites conducted in December 2001, 'it was Putin's appearance and manner that attracted approval, and the way in which they contrasted

¹⁰ See Baker and Glasser (2007) 39-41.

¹¹ Borenstein (2008) 227; Aslund (2007) 207.

¹² See Judha (2013) 48.

with those of his immediate predecessor'.¹³ An analogous argument is provided by Helena Goscilo, who suggests that at the core of Putin's myriad of public relations stunts is an emphasis on his physical prowess and his embodiment of ideal masculinity.¹⁴ Political stagecraft and the ability to manipulate a target audience are, of course, imperative skills for any modern politician. As Max Atkinson observes in his book *Our Master's Voices: The Language and Body Language of Politics*: 'an ability to speak effectively in public is one of the oldest and most powerful weapons in the armoury of professional politicians.'¹⁵ What is divergent about Putin's approach is that the focus is specifically on the corporeal. Russian newspapers and television have been inundated with human interest stories and images of the president engaging in invigorating activities that include diving into the sea to discover Greek amphorae, lifting weights in his private gym, and most famously riding shirtless through the wilds of the Tuva region in Siberia. This emphasis on the physical presentation of Putin, both in the media and arts, is particularly relevant in the context of the re-emergence of political satire in theatre. It places theatre and live performance in a unique position to satirise him, due to it being a live medium that focuses on the actor and their bodily semiotics.

One of the primary reasons Putin has been able to manipulate his well-defined charisma and public persona in the Russian media is a restraint of the freedom of the press, which began early in Putin's first term in office. The outbreak of the Second Chechen War on 20 September 1999 presented Putin with the opportunity to seize control of Russia's independent media. According to Mikhail Berger, editor of the daily Russian newspaper *Sevodyna*, then owned by Vladimir Gusinsky's Media-Most company, Putin saw the media not only as a tool to bolster support for his regime with the electorate, but also as a polarised battleground of different political factions in Russia:

Putin has divided the media into two categories - those organisations that give him total, utter, unquestioning support and those that don't. He views the latter not simply as papers or television companies, but as enemy units which he has to fight [...] Under the Soviet Union, everything was categorised either as

¹³ White and McAllistar (2010) 149.

¹⁴ Goscilo (2013b).

¹⁵ Atkinson (1984) 1.

Soviet or anti-Soviet. Now under Putin, everything is either state or anti-state.¹⁶

In the direct line of fire were the media empires of oligarchs Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky who owned the television channels NTV and Russian Public Television (ORT) respectively. Putin's 'war on the oligarchs', as it became known, saw the Kremlin seize control of both television networks by the end of 2000, while Gusinsky and Berezovsky fled into exile in Western Europe facing charges of corruption and embezzlement.¹⁷ Putin's concentration of control of the mass media and entertainment was demonstrated late in 2000 when one of the first conditions imposed on NTV was the abrupt censoring of topical satirical show *Puppets (Kukly)*. Described as 'one of the most prominent examples of post-Soviet political satire', the programme was modeled on the pioneering British show *Spitting Image* and lampooned Russia's political élite throughout the late 1990s.¹⁸ In the run up to the March 2000 presidential elections, *Puppets* rendered Putin as 'a wimpy czar reluctant to perform his bedroom duties for his bride, Russia; a medieval monk praying to St. Felix (an allusion to Felix Dzerzhinsky; the founder of the Soviet secret police); a judo master defeated by Bill Clinton; a crazed psychiatrist from Chekhov's *Ward No.6*; and E. T. A. Hoffmann's Little Zaches, a vicious monkey-like dwarf who bewitched a city into regarding him as a handsome a wise minister.'¹⁹ The abrupt neutering of *Puppets* left a dearth of satirical and critical depictions of Putin in the arts, and furthermore signalled the onset of state control of both the media and arts in Russia.

The purge of the oligarchs was a momentous success and personal triumph for Putin and resulted in over 90% of all Russian media coming directly or indirectly under his control by 2008.²⁰ This media monopoly has allowed Putin to calibrate a specific public persona that carefully fits the Russian paradigm of a *vozhd* - a strong, decisive, patriarchal leader. Simon Shuster writes that:

the Western principle that the people have a right to know has not been embraced in Russia. [There is] a prevailing sense left over from Soviet and

¹⁶ Gentleman (2000).

¹⁷ See Judha (2013) 42-7; Sakwa (2008b) 150-5; White (2011) 172 ff.

¹⁸ Kozintsev (2008) 175.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 177.

²⁰ Judha (2013) 46.

czarist time that a strong leader – or *vozhd*’ – should remain aloof from the masses if not totally inscrutable.²¹

By associating himself with the iconography of the *vozhd* both through his public performances, such as his presidential inauguration ceremony which took place in the renovated tsarist halls of the Kremlin, and in his cultural and education policies, which positively reappraise Stalin’s role in Russian history, Putin is able to legitimise his state control of civil society and the media, as well as reinforce his own influence and the vertical of power. This view is substantiated by Lena Jonson, who notes that Putin has made ‘a pragmatic selection of historical leaders of whom to be proud, regardless of whether they were from tsarist or Soviet times.’²²

In the context of Putin’s calibration of a public image to fit the archetypal Russian leader, or *vozhd*, it is worth considering the reasons for Putin’s success. Is it the policies of the regime or his personal charisma and ability to harness the sentiment and mood of the Russian electorate in the 2000s? Some have argued that Putin’s success is a result of the economic policies of Putinism, which have seen the economy stabilise after the crash of the Russian stock market in 1998.²³ In contrast, Borenstein notes that ‘Putin’s specific policies and actions arguably matter far less than his reassuring symbolic function as “a real man” who can husband the nation’s resources and promise a return to greatness’.²⁴ Political scientist Marlene Laruelle makes a similar suggestion:

The Kremlin’s success is Vladimir Putin’s own personal feat. Indeed he has generated an increasingly visible cult of personality, which is marked by a proliferation of photos, portraits, busts of the head of state, and endorsements in opinion polls and the literary world as being not only the father of the nation, but also the ideal husband.²⁵

Finally, agnate to this is the contention that Putin is concerned more with strengthening and consolidating his own personal grip on power than the power of the

²¹ Shuster (2011).

²² Jonson (2015) 32.

²³ White and McAllister (2010) 155; Pirani (2010).

²⁴ Borenstein (2008) 227.

²⁵ Laurelle in Van Herpen (2013) 102.

state. One example of this is a school textbook published by the Kremlin in 2000 to coincide with Putin's inauguration: the volume included a biography of Russia's new president concluding with the words, 'Russia, Putin, Unity!'²⁶ Here, the connotation is that Putin and the state are linked symbiotically. This is the establishment of a discourse, which placed Putin with other *vozhds*, such as Stalin, who became inseparable from the state, and a human representation of it. Furthermore, the desire for a vigorous, unyielding, and patriarchal leader that represented Russia and the state in a positive and consummate light on the global stage returns to the opening paragraph of this section, where I described how Yeltsin's alcoholism had become a national embarrassment for Russia. Putin's vigour and leadership became synonymous with the Russian re-emergence on the world stage.

Given that Putin has aimed for his public image to become synonymous with his policies and politics – an almost anthropomorphic embodiment of an antithesis to the chaos of the post-Communist 1990s – it is of little surprise that the state has attempted to censor political satire that parodies and travesties the president. As creator of *BerlusPutin*, Faer attests, political comedy has been driven 'underground', primarily to the Internet.

In this opening section I have identified key issues surrounding Putin's creation of a media image, noting that what is interesting about his approach is that, firstly, it was achieved through control of the media, and, secondly it is specifically corporeal, and also that it is set within specific Russia parameters of the idea of the *vozhd*. These are important considerations to make in regards to this chapter and its discussion of *BerlusPutin* and satire in contemporary Russia.

Putin in the Arts

Examining the case of *Puppets* makes it clear that the Kremlin has been quick to censor art that it views as disrupting the official state narrative on Putin. In the context of Faer's view that political satire is an 'underground' art form in contemporary Russia, it is also worthwhile exploring in depth how Putin has been represented in mainstream culture.

²⁶ In Baker and Glasser (2007) 39.

The 2000s has seen a flurry of artistic output that romanticises and praises Putin. One example is the song ‘Man Like Putin’ (2002) by pop-trio Singing Together, which prompted speculation in the western press that it was part of a public relations stunt organised by the Kremlin.²⁷ Another example is the 2014 art exhibition, *The Twelve Labours of Putin*. The twelve portraits portrayed Putin completing twelve Herculean tasks, including battling western sanctions, and purging the oligarchs.²⁸ Exhibit organiser Mikhail Antonov claimed the event was a sincere celebration of Putin’s leadership to mark his sixty-second birthday, but scholars such as Emily Johnson question the seriousness of such art: ‘should we really take [such examples] as a straightforward attempt to glorify the president?’²⁹ The obsequiousness towards Putin has been further problematised by Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, who ask if contemporary art and culture provide evidence of an emerging ‘cult of Putin’.³⁰ Johnson disputes this idea:

for all that the Putin cult may seem superficially to resemble the cults of personality of the Soviet period, I wonder if it isn’t, at least in certain respects, a fundamentally new animal, a product of distinctly contemporary social and communicative relations that speaks less of true unadulterated hero worship [...] or even organised promotion than it does of rhetorical and perhaps philosophical indeterminacy.³¹

Johnson’s argument can be called into question, however, in the consideration of her claim that there is no ‘organised promotion’ of a Putinist agenda by the Kremlin in contemporary Russia. Russian sociologist Vladimir Shlapentokh argues that one of the Putin regime’s greatest triumphs has been to buy off the majority of the creative intelligentsia, which he identifies as the greatest threat to Putinism.³² Indeed, the majority of the creative class in Russia have toed the official party line, and many have participated in official actions that both favour the regime and disseminate its dogma.³³ Furthermore, unlike the Soviet state, Putin has a wide-reaching and well-

²⁷ Rainsford (2002).

²⁸ Rosenberg (2014)

²⁹ Johnson (2009) 3.

³⁰ Baker and Glasser (2007) 39-40.

³¹ Johnson (2009) 4.

³² Shlapentokh (2010) 54-6.

³³ See Shlapentokh (2010) 54, Jonson (2015) 39.

assembled PR team, which is responsible for the mobilisation and promotion of state-sanctioned popular culture. Alongside Putin's use of western-style media relations, I suggest, however, that Putin's manipulation of the culture sector bears more in common with the Soviet Union than is initially apparent. Although it often eschews more austere artistic dogmas - such as Soviet Realism employed under communism – opting instead for high kitsch, Putinism operates under the same stratagem of Soviet art: the rewarding of artists with lucrative and career progressing contracts for those who toe the party line, coupled with harassment and censorship for those who do not. This policy has been acknowledged in a publication by the ministry of culture, which states that art subverting 'traditional state culture [...] should not receive government support'.³⁴

It is apparent from the examples of 'Man Like Putin' and 'The Twelve Labours of Putin' that artists who do conform to the regime, endorse Putin as a strong, dynamic and decisive leader, whose machismo reflects Russia's revivification on the world stage after the chaos and deprivation of the 1990s. As we shall see, the satire of *BerlusPutin* aims to create a different narrative about Putin that is marginalised in mainstream discourse.

Putin Returns

Unquestionably, Putin enjoyed great support in the 2000s as well as during his term as prime minister between 2008-2012, which became known as 'Putinism without Putin'. Despite the 'coloured revolutions' in many former Soviet republics, Russia saw very little mass unrest during Putin's first two terms in office. This would change, however, when in 2011 Putin announced his intentions to run for an unprecedented third term as president. In December 2011, thousands took to the streets across Russia to protest against this perceived unconstitutional act of hubris.

On 7 May 2012, Vladimir Putin was inaugurated for his third term as president of Russia. The day before, on a wet and grey Sunday in Moscow, over 20,000 protestors participated in the March of the Millions furious about Putin's return to power.³⁵ The disparate and varied gathering of demonstrators, including

³⁴ *Izvestia* (2014).

³⁵ The number of people who attended the demonstration is disputed. Duma deputy Ilya Ponomarev declared there to be over 100,000 marchers, while the Moscow police estimated only 8,000. The figure I use here is one regularly cited by both Russian and Western news outlets.

young families, pensioners, prominent members of the Left Front movement in Russia, nationalists, liberals, LGBTQ activists, anarchists, and cohorts and supporters of Pussy Riot, wearing the group's trademark multi-coloured balaclavas, marched from Okyabrskaya metro station, along Bolshaya Yakimanka Street towards Bolotny Island, located across the Moskva River from Red Square. Gathering in Bolotnaya Square, less than a mile from the Kremlin walls, waving banners and placards mocking Putin and his government, the crowd sang revolutionary songs and provocative chants including: 'Russia without Putin', 'Putin is a thief', and '37 won't work' - a reference to the first year of Stalinist purges in 1937.

As evening approached, the police blocked activists from advancing on the Kremlin, partially kettling them in the Square, blocking off the city centre, and closing metro stations. Bottles and other missiles were thrown in the direction of the police. Putin's press secretary, Dmitri Peskov, appeared on the *Dozhd* television channel inflaming tensions by announcing that he thought the police were being too soft on the protesters, whilst the march organiser and leftist leader Sergi Udaltsov called for the demonstrators to hold their ground and strategised a sit-in. As the authorities attempted to clear the area scuffles broke out. A battalion of riot police and 'shock troops' wielding batons arbitrarily attacked and fought with the protesters before throwing them into the back of police trucks. By the end of the day more than four hundred arrests had been made, including the protest movement's leaders Udaltsov, anti-corruption activist Alexy Navalny, and former deputy prime minister and outspoken critic of Putin, Boris Nemtsov. The popular Russian-language online newspaper *Lenta.ru* reported that Moscow 'had not seen such large-scale street battles in twenty years, maybe more'.³⁶

Three days later, a splinter group of civic activists congregated across town in the Basmanny District of central Moscow, forming a camp around *Christye Prudy* (Clear Ponds). Unlike the March of the Millions, the organisers repudiated the traditional protest banners and chants, and instead staged improvised concerts, poetry readings, and lectures. The camp became known as Occupy Abai, taking its name from Kazakh poet Abai Kunanbaev, whose statue is located on Chistoprudny Boulevard next to where the protesters had gathered. Although the moniker also aligned the demonstration with the global 'Occupy' movements, the aims of those in

³⁶ *Lenta.ru* (2012).

attendance were entrenched in the oppositional cause in Russia and they sought primarily to undermine the Putin regime. Late on 14 May, Teatr.doc attended the camp, performing *BerlusPutin* to a crowd of over 300 audience members. Theatre critic Larisa Chernova describes the performance:

The space was not designed for such shows and the acoustics were so-so [...] The performers broke off for mobiles in the audience, the noise of the wind, [and] to improvise jokes with the crowd [...]. Because of the inability to use the video projection, actors spoke out loud instead [...] The gathered oppositionists were delighted, but applauding the performance was banned so that the noise of the applause did not wake up the residents of nearby houses, although people were still clapping and whistling gently.³⁷

Teatr.doc's decision to perform *BerlusPutin* at Occupy Abai clearly evidences their intent that the play speaks to polemics familiar to those expressed in the protests of the winter of 2011-12. Furthermore, as will be explored in greater detail in the ensuing analysis of the show, it linked the play and Teatr.doc directly with the anti-Putin protest movement. It also marks a paradigm shift in Russian theatre that reflected the anger of the protestors of 6 May.

BerlusPutin

Writer and director of *BerlusPutin*, Varvara Faer, describes the play as a conduit 'to show our political position after 20 years of silence and passivity'.³⁸ The production is one of the most politicised theatre pieces to be staged in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. When Teatr.doc was forced from their original space on Trekprudny Pereulok in December 2014 rumors quickly started to circulate in Moscow that it was a political decision motivated by the theatre's staging of the play.

In addition to being a successful film director, Faer has worked closely with Teatr.doc since its inception, writing, directing, and performing in the documentary play *Crimes of Passion (Prestupleniya strasti, 2002)* during the theatre's inaugural year. As well as directing a variety of other productions at Teatr.doc, she has also directed Natalia Vorozhbit's *Slave Tail (Raba khvosta, 2007)* at the Playwright and

³⁷ Chernova (2012).

³⁸ Faer in Allemandou (2012).

Directors Centre. She has recently become one of the most active political voices in the Russian theatre scene, co-creating a piece of testimony theatre with Mikhail Ugarov on the trial of Pussy Riot members Maria Alyokhina, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, and Yekaterina Samutsevich: *Khamsud: Continued (Khamsud, Prodolzhenie*, 2012). In 2015 she performed at Teatr.doc in Polina Borodina's verbatim play *The Bolotnaya Square Case* about the protests of 6 May 2012.

BerlusPutin is a re-working of Dario Fo's 2003 play *The Two-Headed Anomaly* that starred Fo and his wife Franca Rame. *The Two-Headed Anomaly* was a barbed, satirical attack on then Italian president Silvio Berlusconi, and tells the story of how he survives a terrorist attack by having half of Putin's brain transplanted into his head. In her re-writing of the piece, Faer draws on a variety of disparate source material, including derisive Internet cartoons, popular *anekdoty* (oral joke telling), official interviews with Liudmila Putin, and the memoirs of Marina Salye to transform Fo's original concept into a topical and subversive critique of Putin's presidency and the nefarious nature of contemporary Russian politics.

In her 2011 monograph *Biographical Theatre: Re-Presenting Real People?* theatre scholar Ursula Canton explores how satirical theatre employs factual material to stage public figures. Canton writes:

In terms of biographical theatre, the challenge to Empiricist history and to the belief in a clear dichotomy of factual Truth and fiction was expressed in the playful use of historical and biographical references. One could argue that the way for these forms had been paved by the growing popularity of satire that engaged with contemporary events and figures, but was not supported by an explicit political agenda.³⁹

In *BerlusPutin*, however, the use of historical and biographical references takes on a more politicised aspect. Salye was a Russian politician who audaciously exposed the massive corruption and financial transgressions executed by Putin during his tenure as advisor on international affairs to the Mayor of St. Petersburg in the early 1990s. She was one of the first public critics of the Putin regime, and spent the majority of the 2000s in hiding in the north of Russia before her death in 2012. The use of testimony

³⁹ Canton (2011) 9.

from Salye and Putin's estranged wife Liudmila to construct Putin's biography and provide satiric material for the play is fundamental to the construction of an image of Putin that contests the Kremlin's official biography. As scholar Andrei Rogatchevski notes, even the officially sanctioned book *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait of Russia's President* reveals 'little of profound significance' about Putin's accomplishments prior to his ascendance to prime minister in 1999.⁴⁰ Salye and Liudmila are both figures from Putin's public and private past in St. Petersburg: both women were marginalized after his election, both supposedly exiled to the north of Russia, and in a Stalinesque manner expunged from Putin's history by the Kremlin. The use of Salye's work shows a deliberate politicised agenda in Faer's use of biographical source material and helped form a dominant satirical motif in the play based around Putin's malfeasance in the 1990s.

BerlusPutin premièred at Teatr.doc in February 2012, and at the time of writing remains in the theatre's repertoire. The date is significant for two reasons. Firstly, the play premièred less than a month before the presidential elections in March, and also coincided with Teatr.doc's ten-year anniversary. Before the show even entered the theatre's repertoire, the contentious subject matter caused controversy when the printing company refused to print the promotional material for the show as it depicted Putin's face. This occurrence demonstrates the precarious nature of theatrical events that attempt to subvert Putin's image. Despite attempts to arrange shows outside of Moscow, the production has to date only been staged at Teatr.doc, and the company's website describes the play as 'unofficially banned in all regions of Russia'.⁴¹ In March 2012 a performance at the Palace of Culture in Putin's home city of St. Petersburg was cancelled and authorities have similarly blocked further attempts to tour to other theatres outside Moscow.

Faer regards the performance as 'political satire', noting that 'the principle is similar to *Puppets*'.⁴² Faer's assertion that the play is a piece of satire is interesting as prominent theatre critic Pavel Rudnev observes that the dominant methods for examining political issues in twenty-first century Russia have been the techniques of documentary and verbatim theatre, which have flourished to the exclusion of political satire and topical review shows known as *Estrada*, both of which were popular

⁴⁰ Rogatchevski (2013) 133.

⁴¹ Teatr.doc (2012).

⁴² Shary (2012).

throughout the Soviet years.⁴³ Rudnev elucidates this by suggesting that for, many theatre practitioners in Russia, ‘political = documentary’.⁴⁴ This view has been echoed in Beumers and Lipovetsky’s 2009 study of New Drama, which notes that ‘doc-theatre acquired a reputation as the first post-Soviet political theatre’.⁴⁵ By evoking the trope of political satire and recalling one of the most popular examples of its use in post-Soviet culture, Faer links *BerlusPutin* to a strong lineage of political subversion in the Russian arts. As scholar of Russian literature Karen Ryan argues, ‘satire [...] has always played a significant role in social and political debates in Russia.’⁴⁶

Waiting for Putin

In this section, I will undertake a detailed analysis of *BerlusPutin* in order to show how the production employs the mode of satire, specifically for comic effect, and also how the play addresses different facets of Putin’s presidency.

In common with all performances at Teatr.doc, the audience for *BerlusPutin* congregates in the theatre’s small basement foyer prior to the performance. At the time the play premièred in February 2012, the communal spaces in the theatre were adorned with banners from the December protests, emphasising Teatr.doc’s position as an oppositional space - or as journalist Lucy Ash summarises: ‘Russia’s most daring theatre company’.⁴⁷ The show begins with a video projection onto the stark back wall of the performance space. The audience watch as actor Yevdokia Germanova stands in front of a phalanx of riot police during the March of the Millions (this segment was only added to the production after this date) reciting a monologue from Aristophanes’ satirical comedy *Lysistrata* (411BC). As Germanova reads her lines to the camera, she is jostled by the throng of heavily-armed enforcers and continues her performance as she moves down the wide boulevard with a group of protestors to escape the advances of the police. The video captures the confusion and tumult of the demonstration, helping frame the performance and encouraging the audience to consider the relationship between theatre, protest, and politics in contemporary Russia. Documenting Germanova’s involvement in the march, the film

⁴³ Rudnev (2014).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Beumers and Lipovetsky (2009) 224.

⁴⁶ Ryan (2009) 180.

⁴⁷ Ash (2015).

draws a direct link between the protests of 6 May 2012 and the production, while the use of Aristophanes' text acts a reminder of theatre's long history as a site for embodied political dissidence. Furthermore, the use of video projection is a commonly used staging device in New Drama. Here, Faer is reviving a traditional format of political satire, and incorporating the modern, Russian specific staging devices of New Drama.

As I have argued above, Putin has exploited his control of the media and used television to disseminate and manipulate a pro-Putinist agenda across the country. In this context the use of multimedia in *BerlusPutin* takes on further importance. The footage of Germanova at the March of the Millions is particularly salient, as in more recent years pro-Putin propaganda has manifested in the coverage of anti-government protests. In his analysis of the winter protests in 2011-2012, Dennis Volkov, a member of the independent sociological research group the Levada Centre, argues that, while a broad demographic of the population attended the rallies, the footage was spun by state television to give the appearance that it was primarily attended by wealthy, 'middle-class' Moscovites.⁴⁸ At a talk at the Frontline Club in central London in January 2016, John Freedman - who has participated in many opposition demonstrations along with members of Russia's theatre community – further illuminates the skepticism towards the coverage of anti-government protests. Freedman recalls a rally he attended with his wife, actress Oksana Mysina, where Mysina confronted a film crew from the state operated NTV channel about their failure to document the demonstration until police riled a group of participants into violence. By projecting an alternative image of the protests of 2011 and 2012 in an independent theatre space, the production signals one of its primary intentions: to re-address and rebalance the political narrative in contemporary Russia.

As the projection fades out, the audience is confronted by a heated conversation between an unnamed film director (played by Sergei Yepishev) and an actress (Yevdokia Germanova). In keeping with *Teatr.doc*'s theatrical manifesto, the staging is simplistic. The performance space is void of set dressing and props with the exception of two chairs, while Yepishev and Germanova are dressed in unassuming street clothes. From the inception, Germanova performs her role for laughs, emphasising her character's traits as an ageing diva, more concerned about her fee

⁴⁸ Volkov (2012).

and whether the film will flatter her looks, than the potential plot or political motives of the movie. The film actress is horrified to discover that she has been cast to play the part of Putin's estranged wife Liudmila in the director's new film: a political satire that will travesty both Vladimir and Liudmila Putin. At the performances of *BerlusPutin* that I have attended, this revelation created a susurrant of laughter and generated an atmosphere of anticipation in the theatre for the comedic potential of the situation. The audience is well aware of the political and personal consequences that can face artists who provoke the Putin regime.⁴⁹ Here the script is asking spectators to reflect on the place of political satire in Putin's Russia, as well as the realities facing artists and journalists who choose to eschew and challenge the officially-sanctioned discourse of the Kremlin. This plot device also evokes a traditional component of satiric performance that dates back to the theatre of Aristophanes. As literary theorist Kenneth Burke famously writes:

The most inventive satire arises when the artist is seeking simultaneously to take risks and escape punishment for his boldness, and is never quite certain himself whether he will be acclaimed or punished.⁵⁰

In other words, an important premise of satire is the concept of it being perceived as a dangerous occupation for those making it, regardless of whether this attestation of risk is fictional or legitimate. This can help to invest the audience in the production and galvanise a connection between performer and audience through the creation of a shared frisson in the illicitness of the event. Although in Aristophanic comedy, as well as most contemporary British satire, the danger is often constructed as part of the performance and is intended ironically, the recent evictions of Teatr.doc from their original space, and then from their new venue in the summer of 2015, gives this element of the production a different context.

The opening scene continues to highlight the precarious place of political satire in contemporary Russia by playing on the ambiguity between reality and the malaise of Germanova's character. As the actress continues to worry about the potential repercussions of satirising Putin, she enquires: 'will we be able to mock him

⁴⁹ This has been discussed in greater detail in the introduction to this thesis.

⁵⁰ Burke (1992) 231-2. Also see Griffin (1994) 43; Rosen (2012) 11.

without his permission?’⁵¹ Here, the comedy revolves around the audience’s awareness that the play is a departure from official artistic depictions of Putin that have been discussed above, and draws attention to Teatr.doc’s position as one of only a small cluster of independent theatres in central Moscow that operates without government funding or official state backing.

The opening section of *BerlusPutin* thus emphasises the play’s satiric credentials. Its meta-analysis of what can and can’t be said in Putin’s Russia highlights the risk Teatr.doc and the performers are taking by staging the performance. The comic dialogue also asks the audience to consider the restrictions on artistic freedoms imposed by the Kremlin as authoritarian and ridiculous.

Putin Appears

As the director continues to convince the actress of the importance of his project, they start rehearsing scenes from the movie in an attempt to relieve her concerns. In the plot of the movie, Putin and his close friend and political ally Silvio Berlusconi become victims of an attempted assassination by terrorists while holidaying together in Sochi. Both leaders are shot in the head, killing Berlusconi immediately. Putin is only saved through a phantasmagorical medical procedure, where neurosurgeons transplant half of Berlusconi’s brain into his head. The operation, however, has unforeseen consequences, and Putin suffers severe memory loss and is unable to recall his political past. Furthermore, the transplant miraculously transforms Putin into a benign and altruistic individual, or as it is explained in the text: ‘*two negatives cancel each other out creating a positive*’.⁵²

In an attempt to restore his memory and rediscover his identity, Putin travels to the secluded Spaso-Yelizarovsky Monastery in the north west of Russia, where his wife Liudmila is living in seclusion. Initially, Liudmila is concerned at what kind of political monster has been created by the amalgamation of Putin and Berlusconi’s personalities. She recommends that such an aberration should be locked up in the monastery, and curses her lack of arsenic and polonium to poison him. This is another comic recall to Putin’s political ruthlessness, which is immediately picked up on by the audience at Teatr.doc. Under Putin there have been a number of suspicious deaths

⁵¹ Faer (2012a). The quotations from the play referenced here are from an electronic version of a script from a performance of the play at Teatr.doc on 15 September 2013.

⁵² *Ibid.*

linked to the Kremlin involving these poisons, and perhaps most pertinent for a British readership was the murder of whistleblower Alexander Litvinenko, who died in London of polonium poisoning in 2006.

Putin approaches the monastery on skis clutching an amphora under his arms, which is a play on the publicity stunt televised on Russian television in 2011 that saw the president unearth two ancient Greek urns on the bed on the Black Sea. The acting out of Putin's famous public performances are an integral part of this scene. The aim is not to make the audience aware of Putin's actions; indeed, the humour revolves around their awareness of them. Instead, the scene aims to provoke a reaction described by Swiss dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt:

In laughter, man's freedom is manifested in tears, his necessity; our task today is to demonstrate freedom. The tyrants of this planet are not moved by the work of poets [...] They fear only one thing: our ridicule. That is why parody has crept into every genre, into the novel, into drama, into lyric poetry. Much of painting, of music, has been conquered by parody, and in its wake, overnight, often in disguise, the grotesque has made its appearance as well: it is simply suddenly there.⁵³

Discussing *BerlusPutin*, Faer herself has re-iterated the terms of Dürrenmatt's dialogue:

[The reaction I want from the audience is] laughter. It is a strong weapon against the powers, against inflated and hypocritical ghouls. Laughter is a very powerful weapon that attacks all arrogance. I think Dario Fo counted on this when he created his play.⁵⁴

In other words, Faer and Dürrenmatt argue that comedy and laughter can have a profound effect on the impact of a play on its audience and how they interpret its message. By acting out these scenes, *BerlusPutin* not only implores the audience to examine the absurdity of the fact that Putin's presidency is built on such media images, but also to revel in the idea of collectively being able to laugh at an

⁵³ Dürrenmatt (2006) 159.

⁵⁴ Shary (2011).

authoritarian figure in a way that is generally unavailable to Russians due to the regime's censorship of satire. In light of the play's previous discourse on the nature of censorship of the arts in contemporary Russia when the actress worries about the possibility of the film being censored, laughter acquires a greater pertinence, as it becomes an act of opposition towards the Putin regime.

When Putin meets with Liudmila he asks her to detail to him what kind of president he was, hoping this will trigger his memory. To his consternation, he is presented with a detailed enumeration of his abuses of power stretching from their wedding night to his premiership. Ashamed by these revelations, he begs Liudmila to stop talking and instead have sex with him. This provokes her to castigate him and shout '*you will not be able to rape me, because I am not Russia.*'⁵⁵ The dialogue raises the spectre of Stalinism when Liudmila catalogues her husband's transgressions against Russia and its people, and the Stalin era is further evoked during Putin's subsequent denouncement of his action in the Duma. Putin's posturing as a *vozhd* had led to wide-ranging comparisons between Putin and Stalin, and here the text is concerned with the question of why Russia should have to wait for Putin to lose power before it can ask difficult questions about his presidency. De-Stalinsation has been an agonizing process that has continued throughout the Soviet period and post-Communist Russia for decades, and Faer suggests that acquiescence to the regime will result in Russia only being able to consider the true implications of Putin's presidency after he leaves power.

As detailed above, one of the core facets of Putin's success with the Russia electorate has been his ability to distance himself from the unpopularity of the Yeltsin era in the 1990s. Putin has painted himself as both the antithesis of this period, as well as Russia's savior from the turbulence of the post-Communist era. Drawing on Salye's portrayal of Putin in the 1990s reminds the audience that he is not a disembodied figure of the perceived relative stability of the new millennium. *BerlusPutin* accentuates that Putin was an integral part of the corruption of the 1990s and exploited it for personal gain. Liudmila's listing of Putin's corruption from the 1990s to the present day in an unbroken lineage suggests that Putin's exploitation of Russia's political system is continuous, and has simply manifested in different ways.

⁵⁵ Faer (2012a).

Putin returns to Moscow and, in an attempt to seek atonement for his transgressions, addresses the Russian parliament, exhorting them to be principled politicians and to forgive his past actions. He announces a plan to dissolve the Duma, calls new elections, and re-opens a criminal investigation into his venal actions. As Yepishev delivers this speech, a video is played of documentary footage of the current Duma laughing hysterically at Putin's suggestions. Foregrounded in this footage is politician and chairman of the Central Election Commission of Russia, Vladimir Churov, who has close ties to Putin since working under him during the latter's tenure as Mayor of St. Petersburg in the 1990s. Churov was singled out for particular criticism by the December protestors who demanded his resignation after he had claimed that the results of the 2011 Russian legislative elections had not been falsified, contrary to the belief of many opposition supporters. A popular *anekdoty* at the time went as followed: 'Breaking news: Vladimir Churov has been badly injured in a fire. He sustained burns over 150 percent of his body'. In this scene, the capacity of laughter to wound authoritarian figures is indicated through the laughter of fellow politicians at Putin's address. This time the laughter is directed at Putin because he has lost the Machiavellianism he has employed to entrench his power. Putin's memory loss and ridicule by the Duma is a signifier that Putin's control of Russia is based on the precarious concept of his image as a powerful leader or *vozhda*, and that if this is savaged and attacked it could result in his entire façade as Russia's savior collapsing. This corresponds with White and McAllister's salient and compelling conclusion that the power base of Putinism and the "Putin phenomenon" has weak roots' and is bolstered by a 'basis of support that is "a mile wide but an inch deep"'.⁵⁶

Demoralised by the Duma's response to his proposals, Putin decides to undergo electric shock therapy in an attempt to restore him to his past self. This is, in part, a success as Putin is able to restore his memory. The treatment, however, has an adverse side effect that results in Putin's accumulated years of Botox injections running down his face, transforming his facial features into those of Dobby the House Elf from the Harry Potter movies. As Putin comes to terms with his appearance, Liudmila blithely informs him that, due to his prior decree in front of the Duma, he is due to stand trial for abuse of office and embezzlement of state property. Furthermore, he also learns that on his own orders he has transferred presidential powers to his

⁵⁶ White and McAllister (2010) 155.

great rivals Navalny and Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Devastated, Putin asks Liudmila ‘*Is it the end of the world?*’ ‘*No*’ she replies, ‘*you’ve just become unfashionable!*’⁵⁷

As I observe in the introduction to this chapter, an attempt to survey the jokes and satire of *BerlusPutin* is fraught with potential difficulty as, in keeping with Fo’s employment of the *commedia dell’arte* technique of on-stage improvisation, *BerlusPutin* is centered on a basic framework and plot, with updates being added each time the production is performed.

One of the few constants in the show’s run has been the physical depiction of Putin. When Yepishev appears as Putin, he is dressed in a grotesque foam rubber prosthesis of a naked torso with prominent muscles, parodying the official images released by the Kremlin of his posing topless. Yepishev points out that the focus of *BerlusPutin*’s satire is not Putin’s policies and politics, but instead the ‘character’ that he projects in the media.⁵⁸ Yepishev’s reading of the satire is analogous to both Putin’s substitution of politics with his own persona, and the art that celebrates him and supports the ideology of Putinism. The emphasis of the costume focuses on paradigmatic representations of Putin rather than a deep, politicised depiction of his psychology. The corporeal focus of the costume, ironically reverses its typical function: instead of covering the body, it reveals it in all its grotesque detail. The grotesque aberration from the normative celebration and fetishisation of Putin’s corporeal identity in public elicits humour by reducing Putin’s dynamic public persona through absurd travesty. Putin’s Botox forms a purulent mask over his face, resembling Dobby the House Elf. Unlike Putin’s torso, the use of a mask to comically caricature Putin’s facial features is not simply an exaggeration of his physical features, it also recreates a popular Internet joke circulating on the Russian-language Internet that Putin resembles the CGI of Dobby.

This close reading of *BerlusPutin* has aimed to highlight and contextualise the comic satire employed by Faer and the actors throughout the play’s narrative. The comedy reinforces Faer’s contention that the piece is an attempt ‘to show our political position after 20 years of silence and passivity’.⁵⁹ Faer’s comment that laughter is a forceful weapon against Putin and Putinism is important as it highlights the satirical comedy, but also raises questions about how, like satire, laughter can unite performers

⁵⁷ Faer (2012a).

⁵⁸ Yepishev in Allemandou (2012)

⁵⁹ Faer in Allemandou (2012).

and audience on a topical theme. Unlike typical impersonators, Yepishev does not attempt to look like Putin, and neither does he mimic the president's physical mannerisms or diction. Instead, the comedy derives from seeing these well-known jokes about Putin and his most famous public performances acted out on stage. In a society that has censored political diversity and criticism of the Putin regime, Yepishev's performance stands as an act of defiance and protest, in which the audience can revel.

The Importance of Protest

So far, my analysis of *BerlusPutin* suggests that the play holds a unique position in New Drama through its representation of Putin on stage and its use of aggressive and comic satire to mock and travesty him. These observations lead to the questions: is *BerlusPutin* simply a show that provides the audience with something lacking in the mainstream discourse of contemporary Russian media and society, and a chance to laugh at the absurdities of Putin's public performance? Can we conclude, as Faer indicates, that the audiences' laughter is the performance's primary 'weapon' against the Putin regime?⁶⁰ Is the play a straightforward piece of comic satire, or is it a more subversive piece of theatre that articulates a greater consideration of the widespread dissent that captured Russians in the wake of Putin's return to the presidency in early 2012?

To answer these questions, it is important to examine the final section of the play. In the last scene, the film actress breaks character, unable to continue her performance: 'I'm betraying all my political principles' she shouts.⁶¹ 'I love Putin! I love Berlusconi!' At this point, the actress' true identity is revealed as a spy for the government. Despite this revelation, however, her plan to disrupt the making of the film is unsuccessful and ironically the film transpires to be huge success. The performance concludes with a video clip of Secretary of State for the United States, Hillary Clinton, thanking the actress for her work in making the film a blockbuster, and revealing that it was in fact financed by the United States Department of State. Clinton's appearance plays on well-known political apprehensions in Russia about Western influence, which have been exploited by the Kremlin to attack NGOs and

⁶⁰ Shary (2012).

⁶¹ Faer (2012a).

artists who oppose the state as agents of foreign influence.⁶² In the projected film, Clinton also acknowledges the audience as plants who have been enticed into attending the production for financial rewards, referring to claims made by Putin at the end of 2011 that Clinton had been responsible for fomenting the wave of December protests in Moscow of that year.

As the play finishes, Yepishev and Germanova take their curtain call to a recording of 1950s pop tune 'Blueberry Hill' recalling Putin's absurd performance of the song at a celebrity charity event in St. Petersburg. As the audience leave their seats and exit the auditorium, a further link is made back to the anti-Putin protests of 2011 and 2012 when they are offered biscuits to eat on their journey home. State television channel NTV had claimed that protestors at rallies in the run up to the 2012 presidential elections were offered free biscuits by opposition leaders as an incentive to turn out in order to unnaturally augment the numbers in attendance.⁶³ In the narrative of *BerlusPutin*, the biscuits are the audiences' bribe for their participation as extras in this piece of propaganda organised by the Western-backed opposition movement.

The conclusion of *BerlusPutin* suggests a further dimension to the play beyond its comic and satirical survey of Putin's iconography and documentation of his corruption. The performance invites the audience to consider their own position in the increasingly polarised narrative of Putin's Russia. The production ends on such a note as to make clear that the audience has implicitly, and presumably in some cases unwittingly, taken part in a protest themselves. While many of the audience may not have taken part in the wave of anti-Putin opposition of 2011-12 or consider themselves politically active, *BerlusPutin* challenges this acquiescence to the regime, implicitly asking if they are with them or against them. The ending suggests that coming to see political theatre, and in particular Teatr.doc, is now an act of protest against the regime. In this way, *BerlusPutin* reintroduces the idea that attending the theatre can be a political act. The audience at a performance of the play are not passive observers of political dissent, but also complicit actors in it themselves.

Although the evoking of theatre as a conduit of social change and political activism is not new in Russia - theatre director Kama Ginkas states: 'Russian theatre

⁶² Putin's adoption of a neo-Slavophile ideology has been explored in greater detail in the introduction to this thesis.

⁶³ *BBC* (2012).

is not a time killer. It is and always has been something of consequence⁶⁴ – it was one of the first occasions that Ginka’s provocative statement had been tacitly implied in a piece of New Drama. Faer’s contention that the performance is an attempt ‘to show our political position after 20 years of silence and passivity’ replicates the mood of the protest movement in Russia.⁶⁵ The play is a highly successful piece of topical satire, but it is also an extension of the wider dissent of the winter of 2011-12, a kairotic moment where civic life in Moscow became politicised, and acquiescence to the Kremlin was no longer accepted by members of the opposition.

Satirical performance on stage and the importance of the live act

The permute nature of the performance puts the emphasis on the skilled improvisation of Yepishev and Germanova. As Svetlana Belova - who was part of the play’s original creative team – attests, the material performed can change from production to production, one day to the next, to accommodate current news stories, and re-work material that does not work comedically.⁶⁶ In many ways, the creative approach taken by Faer and the cast of *BerlusPutin* in incorporating improvisational techniques to maintain the topicality of the humour, recalls the ethos of Soviet Blue Blouse theatre makers: ‘*Agitki* [agit-prop performance pieces] come into being, sharp, whip-like, up to the minute, directly linked with our everyday life, vivid, bright, easy to remember.’⁶⁷ This suggests that for satirical theatre to have the most visceral effect on its audience, spontaneity of performance and thematic topicality are vital in productions of political theatre.

In the performance of the play, Germanova’s physicalisation of Liudmila Putin is relies on comedic stock traits. Unlike the amplified costume utilised for Putin, Luydmila is portrayed by the actor wrapping a scarf around her head and employing a gaunt posture. Throughout her performance, Germanova accentuates her characterisation in response to the audiences’ laughs and responses. Analysing comic performance, Ian Wilkie highlights the importance of the relationship between actor and audience in the creation of artistic reciprocity. ‘In live performance the interplay of comic message transmitted by the actor(s) and the received response from the audience occur both instantaneously and as part of an exponential process throughout

⁶⁴ Ginkas (2003) 14.

⁶⁵ Faer in Allemandou (2012).

⁶⁶ Belova (2012) 86.

⁶⁷ *Blue Blouse*, 1925. Quoted in Stourac and McCreery (1986) 12.

the performance and it allows for mutual evaluation of the effectiveness of the theatrical event to be simultaneously and continuously undertaken.⁶⁸ Wilkie further elucidates:

In live performance, even a simple pause to allow a laugh to punctuate the performance signals that acting in a comedy requires an, albeit tacit, acknowledgement of the audience's responsiveness. The unacknowledged 'acknowledgement' of a response, cued by an audience's laughter, in turn can affect the actor's playing of a moment, her/his holding of a pause, emphasising of a look or stressing of a word or line.⁶⁹

In *BerlusPutin*'s performance the comedic connection between actor and audience adds a further dimension to the performance. It allows a link to be made between theatre and political dissent, and as we shall see, helps Teatr.doc forge a sense of collectivism, which has been vital in helping it survive after being targeted by the authorities.

Furthermore, in the context of this chapter's analysis of *BerlusPutin*, Findlater's emphasis on the actor's ability to 'kindle an instant collective response' recalls the discussion on the opposition demonstration in the winter of 2011 and 2012. The concept of a shared sense of collectivity among the protestors was a preoccupation for many Russian writers in their immediate analyses of the first large-scale protest movement in Russia for a generation. Writing in daily business newspaper *Vedomosti*, journalist Alexei Levinson argues that the defining feature of the demonstrations was the wide demographic of protestors united in a collective spirit of opposition towards the Putin regime. Levinson suggests that this set these protests apart from previous anti-Kremlin rallies, which were centred around 'middle-class' identities or single issues such as pensions.⁷⁰ Russian scholars Oleg Zhuravlev *et al* have echoed a similar position:

in the specific, narrow sense, we could say that [the] Bolotnaya [Square Protest – the culmination of the demonstrations of 6 May 2012] was not a

⁶⁸ Wilkie (2016) 12.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 13.

⁷⁰ Levinson (2012).

revolution, but had a revolutionary ‘component’, insofar as it, like all revolutions beginning with the French, created a collective identity, not only uniting all the protesters but also aspiring to universality, to representation and unification of the entire country.⁷¹

These accounts suggest that the protests of 2011-12 were defined by different political and social alliances becoming united in a collective opposition of Putinism. The theatrical experience of watching *BerlusPutin* with an audience allied by laughter and comedy in a shared communal space, gives the play an important link to the recent anti-Putin protests. In *BerlusPutin*, Faer and her collaborators tapped into a feeling of togetherness created by opposition towards Putin and the perceived political corruption of the government.

Putin.doc: Comparing the Satiric Modes

Although Russian critics received *BerlusPutin* as a performance unrivalled in twenty-first century Russia for its boldness in travestyng Putin in a live performance, it is not the only piece of theatre to have satirically engaged with Putin’s presidency. Viktor Teterin’s play *Putin.doc* (2005) premièred at the KC Home Theatre in 2005 under the direction of Olga Fedoseeva, and was subsequently published in the anthology *Putin.doc: Nine Revolutionary Plays* compiled by Rudnev and Andrei Malgin, which included work by students from Nikolai Koliada’s playwriting school in Yekaterinburg.⁷² Teterin, originally from the city of Saransk, is based in Moscow and among his influences are many prominent writers of New Drama including Vasily Sigarev and Mikhail and Vyacheslav Durnenkov. Although many of Teterin’s plays are written in the linguistic style of these playwrights, *Putin.doc* is a stylistic departure, described by Teterin as including ‘elements of the absurd’.⁷³

The Home Theatre is a cramped proscenium arch space, and in Fedoseeva’s staging of the play the actors sat on either side of the raised stage, often static and motionless. The formality of the auditorium results in a lack of intimacy contrasting with performances of *BerlusPutin*, where Teatr.doc’s performance space allows for a

⁷¹ Zhuravlev, Savelyeva, Alyukov (2014)

⁷² The collection, titled *Putin.doc*, is described by Beumers and Lipovetsky as ‘one of the artistic manifestos of New Drama as a movement.’ Beumer and Lipovetsky (2009) 227.

⁷³ Teterin (2005) 9.

delineation between actor and audience and greater chance for comic interaction during the show.

The play is a dialogue between Ivan and Peter, two ‘*ardent supporters of the President of Russia*’, and members of the United Russia party who go to extra lengths to display their loyalty to Putin.⁷⁴ In the Home Theatre production, costume was used to emphasize the importance of Ivan and Peter’s respective occupations. Ivan, a stereotypical corporate manager is dressed in a suit, while Peter wears full military dress signaling his position as a colonel in the Russian Ministry of Defence. Ivan and Peter represent two very specific figures of the 2000s: the affluent New Russian, a symbol of Russia’s newfound wealth and consumer society, and senior military figures, or *siloviki*. That Teterin chooses to portray Ivan and Peter as these two archetypes is unsurprising and clearly deliberate. Both groups are core supporters of the Putin administration and in the 2000s their prominence and importance in Russian society and politics rose.

As the show opens, the two men are engaged in a debate about the merits of Putinism and the effect of its policies on the country. Peter informs Ivan of Putin’s announcement to double Russia’s GDP by 2010, and both men agree with the importance of this statement. Ivan then evokes Putin’s famous speech of 24 September 1999, which has been equally lionized and deplored by political commentators in Russia. Responding to the wave of apartment bombings instigated by Chechen terrorists in the same month, Putin announced at a press conference that he would endeavor to:

pursue terrorists everywhere. If they are in the airport, we will pursue them in the airport. And if we capture them in the toilet, then we will waste them in the outhouse [...] The issue has been resolved once and for all.⁷⁵

Ivan’s use of Putin’s famous idiom ‘waste them in the outhouse’ and the duo’s positive appraisal of Putin’s promise to raise GDP imply that their reverence for Putin is built on a single facet of Putinism that was a prominent feature in the rhetoric of his first term, and recalls a speech he made as prime minister in 1999. In a phrase that has come to encapsulate Putin’s political stance and ideology, he rallied the Russian

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Putin in Saradzhyan (2011).

nation to ‘get off its knees’ and demonstrate its power. Ivan and Peter’s praise of Putin raises concerns that his support was based on short-term, demagogic policies that aimed to restore Russian pride after its abatement on the world stage in the 1990s. That the pair agree with Putin’s jingoism and instigation of the Second Chechen War is further demonstrated by an extremely prescient joke that Putin should consider military action against Ukraine after the Tuzla Island territorial dispute between the two countries in October 2003.

The ‘absurdist’ elements of the play are revealed when Ivan and Peter engage in rivalry to determine which of them is the biggest fan of Putin, which they hope will be judged by the president himself. In the second scene, Peter reveals he has spent 20000 rubles commissioning a life-size portrait of Putin while Ivan recites a poem he has written celebrating Putin’s political accomplishments. Ivan’s poem further traverses two of the key features of Putin’s first term: the Chechen war and the Kremlin’s co-option of the media through the purge of the oligarchs. In the second round of their competition Ivan covers the walls of his apartment with giant posters of Putin commanding a submarine, while Peter reveals he has taught his regiment of soldiers the lyrics to the oleaginous contemporary pop song ‘Man Like Putin’. The competition becomes increasingly absurd when Ivan legally changes his name to Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and is subsequently outdone by Peter who undergoes plastic surgery to transform his facial features into Putin’s.

Teterin’s inspiration for Ivan and Peter clearly come from the bizarre actions of real-life supporters of Putin. A Siberian man is reported to have adopted Putin’s surname, while a former deputy prime minister of Bashkortostan wrote a three-page ode to Putin that consisted exclusively of words beginning with the letter ‘p’.⁷⁶ In contrast to *BerlusPutin*, Teterin views Putin’s public persona as a construct of his supporters rather than the Kremlin. As discussed above, Johnson argues that Putin’s public performances and the creation of an official Kremlin narrative that supports his media persona is ‘more about the act of worship than the godhead, per se’.⁷⁷ Johnson suggests the general Russian public consume pro-Putin news stories and pop culture such as the song like ‘Man like Putin’ and enjoy them for their irony viewing it as harmless fun. Furthermore, Johnson argues that Putin and his administration played a ‘secondary role’ in the creation and importance of his public image, asking: ‘isn’t the

⁷⁶ Goscilo (2013a) 7; White and McAllister (2010) 139.

⁷⁷ Johnson (2009) 5.

real subject of the Putin cult, and hence of any book that focuses on it, the cult's diffuse army of creators and consumers?'⁷⁸

Although Faer and Teterin both use satire to examine Putin's public persona and presidency, they use the form in strikingly different ways. As Holbert *et al* write, satire is comprised of a variety of distinctive techniques and modes: 'it is clear that we should *not* be describing satire as a single entity'.⁷⁹ In the *Anatomy of Satire*, Gilbert Highet identifies two of the most significant facets of satire as stemming from the Latin poets Horace and Juvenal. Horatian satire, Highet contends, is optimistic and 'believes that folly and evil are not innate in humanity, or if they are, they are eradicable. They are diseases that can be cured. They are mistakes which can be corrected.'⁸⁰ In contrast, Juvenalian satirists write 'in order to punish [...] there is not joy in it, no healing warmth. [They laugh] with contempt at their pretensions and incongruities and base hypocrisies.'⁸¹ In other words, Highet suggests a dominant dichotomy of satire between Horatian and Juvenalian models, which aim to persuade and critique in divergent ways.

Putin.doc takes a softer, Horatian approach focusing on Putin's supporters rather than Putin's own idiosyncrasies, suggesting that Putin has maintained power through an emerging cult of personality that mobilises support amongst the electorate and gains votes this way. The play poses questions about the shortcomings of Russian democracy and the political system in the 2000s. *BerlusPutin* instead targets Putin directly, arguing that he is a monstrous aberration, who has used media manipulation and corruption to maintain his grip on power.

In scene five, after Peter recites Putin's address to the Federal Assembly on 16 May 2003, Ivan comments that he particularly enjoyed it due to its '*imperial* [державностью]' tone.⁸² Returning to the initial discussion of Putinism in this chapter, Ivan's comment recalls Putin's deliberate calibration to fit the persona of a *vozhd*. By appointing Putin as the judge of their competition, Teterin's Putin is a patriarchal authority figure who is wise and powerful, aligning with Shuster's description of a Russian *vozhd* as 'a strong leader [...] aloof from the masses'.⁸³ In contrast *BerlusPutin* attacks Putin's claims to be a father of the Russian nation and the

⁷⁸ Ibid. 4

⁷⁹ Holbert *et al.* (2008) 192.

⁸⁰ Highet (1962) 236.

⁸¹ Ibid. 235-7.

⁸² Teterin (2005).

⁸³ Shuster (2011).

country's savior. Playing on the infamous rumour that Putin has engaged in an affair with former Olympic gymnast Alina Kabayeva, 31 years his junior, Yepishev, as Putin, comically prowls around the stage shouting '*I need sex*', while a montage of Kabayeva's gymnastic routines plays on a projection screen behind him.⁸⁴ Faer comically satirises and subverts the obsequious representations of Putin as a Tsar-like *Vozhd*, aloof from sexual desire and base human urges, and that Putin's family ethos and sexual control is allied with the notion that he is in control of Russia's fortunes.

The key difference between the opposing satiric modes employed by *BerlusPutin* and *Putin.doc* is in their treatment of Russian democracy. Teterin's play ultimately suggests that the electoral system in Russia under Putin remains fair and functional, but has simply been exploited by the government to retain power. This power, Teterin argues, stems directly from well-meaning but ultimately misinformed support from the Russian electorate in the form of Ivan and Peter. *BerlusPutin's* vehement Juvenalian satire demonstrates a deep distrust of the democratic system under Putin. Faer's Putin is inherently corrupt and opportunist in his political actions. His exploitation of the turbulent political situation in the 1990s, and his actions during his presidency have made the idea of modern Russian democracy a grotesque farce. *BerlusPutin's* rage echoes the mistrust in the political system that occurred when Putin announced his intentions to stand as president for a third term in 2011, which was for many a moment when the veneer of democracy was finally stripped away, revealing the moribund state of political freedom in Putin's Russia.

The variation in satirical tone between Teterin's *Putin.doc*, first produced in 2005, and *BerlusPutin*, which premièred a month before the 2012 presidential elections, perhaps demonstrates a change in attitudes towards Putin's presidency over this period. When *Putin.doc* was first performed in 2005, at the beginning of Putin's second term in office, there was a focus on why the electorate found Putin appealing and how he was able to exploit this. In the intervening years, the regime's authoritarian stance has seen press freedoms decline, journalists murdered, and the spectre of election fraud emerge, resulting in Russia's democracy rating by the NGO on political freedom and democracy, Freedom House, change from 'party free' to 'not free' in 2005, and then to 'consolidated authoritarian regime' in 2012.⁸⁵ As I have contended, the tipping point can be identified as Putin's decision to run for a third

⁸⁴ Faer (2012a).

⁸⁵ See White (2011) 355 for results of the Freedom House surveys.

presidential term, which provoked a wave of large scale anti-government demonstrations previously unseen during the Putin era.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined Teatr.doc's production *BerlusPutin*, in relation to the evolution of Putinism throughout Putin's presidency. I suggest the play supports the verdict that 2012 marked a turning point for the administration, as it experienced the first obvious mass mobilisation of dissent caused by what many perceived to be an arrogant disregard of the Russian constitution and democratic principles.

Although I identify a number of elements about the play that stands in a long line of satirical tradition, such as an attestation of risk and the emphasis on ridiculing the powerful, *BerlusPutin* is also firmly rooted in the political discord of 2011-12, where anti-Putin protests galvanised previously un-politicised members of society into civic action. My argument is that a return of political satire to the Russian stage has deeper implications than to simply re-address the chasm left in the Russian arts by Putin's censorship and the state co-option of the media. I further suggest that the comic performances of the actors in the play also frame it as a distinctive piece of anti-Putin art due to the way in which it connects with the audience, and implies that the play is a collective act of opposition by both the creative team and those watching it.

Finally, by comparing *BerlusPutin* with Teterin's *Putin.doc* I have identified a dynamic change in the satirical treatment of Putinism by New Drama writers. I argue that the differential between *Putin.doc*'s employment of Horatian satire and the Juvenalian mode of *BerlusPutin* demonstrates a clear turning point in how theatre makers interpreted the reason for Putin's popularity. Teterin sees it as stemming from the electorate, while Faer argues it emanates from Putin's inherent corruption and manipulation of the democratic process.

In the following chapter, I will consider how New Drama has responded the pertinent moment in the development of Putinism, the Second Chechen War. Framing my discussion of the two case studies within the revival of militarised gender norms in Putin's Russia, I argue that New Drama have staged 'counter-narratives' that challenge the established discourse of Putinism.

Chapter Three: Chechnya and Beyond: Staging the Soldier in New Drama

Introduction

On 1 October 1999, approximately 50,000 Russian soldiers advanced over the Dagestani-Chechen boarder, marking the start of the ground campaign of what would become known as the Second Chechen War (1999-2009). Three years earlier, the First Chechen War (1994-1996) had ended with a humiliating and unimaginable defeat for the Russian army and the Yeltsin administration after the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Chechen capital of Grozny in the face of pervasive public opinion against the war.¹ Although Putin officially concluded the end of the Second Chechen War in April 2002, the horrifying brutality of the military campaign meant that it became a paramount and defining juncture of his first two terms in office during the 2000s. The Second Chechen War has been identified as a propitious nexus in both defining and legitimising the policies and themes of Putinism. As Russian human rights activist Sergei Kovalev argues, Putin ‘owes his accession to the presidency largely to his backing of the war.’² Scholars of contemporary Russian politics Roland Dannreuther and Luke March also attribute Putin’s consolidation of power in the 2000s to the war, writing that ‘Putin’s strategy during the war and the subsequent pacification of Chechnya have helped construct the post-Yeltsin Russian state in a way that has seen the increased centralisation of power and the promotion of authoritarian state structures.’³ Russian political scientist Pavel Baev echoes this, attributing elements of a ‘personal crusade’ to Putin’s engagement with the military campaign, noting that it has become a ‘trademark of Putin’s presidency, from the very start.’⁴

This chapter examines the impact of the complex legacy of the Second Chechen War on new theatre writing in contemporary Russia. Despite the totemic

¹ For more detailed accounts of the First Chechen War, see Lieven (1999) and Evangelista (2002) 11-45. Lieven gives a first person account on his experience of reporting in Chechnya during the war, and contextualises Russia’s defeat in the context of the Yeltsin administration. Evangelista argues that the First Chechen War was driven by nationalist sentiment and focuses on the human rights abuse violations by Russia during the conflict.

² Kovalev (2000).

³ Dannreuther and Marsh (2008) 98.

⁴ Baev (2004) 6.

importance of the war in contemporary Russian politics and the manifold New Drama productions that respond to the two Chechen Wars, to date no study has examined how theatre makers have engaged with the conflicts and military tropes in the twenty-first century. Theatre director and critic Yana Ross observes that:

a surprising number [of plays] are trying to tackle the current war in Chechnya and speak of its aftermath. Plays where soldiers return home, physically and emotionally depleted, are not just literal tributes to the daily horrors that Russia tends to ignore in the media (officially the war is over) but also thoughtful exploration of the long-term effects the war will have on this generation.⁵

Ross's is one the few accounts to acknowledge and underscore the intersections between Putin's fervent renewal of the Russian army's involvement in Chechnya and the development of the New Drama canon. By considering New Drama's engagement with the Chechen Wars, I will facilitate a wider discussion on how playwrights in Russia have directly interrogated one of the core foundations of Putinism: the strengthening of the army and patriotic values. By doing, so I aim to demonstrate the political potency of New Drama in its facilitation of the creation of new discourses on contemporary Russian politics that run in opposition to the established rhetoric of the Putin regime. In this context I use the term 'counter-narrative' in this chapter as defined by political theorist Molly Andrews as 'the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives'.⁶ Counter-narratives are, therefore, in opposition to what are referred as 'dominant' or 'master narratives': 'counter-narratives only make sense in relation to something else, that which they are countering. The very name identifies it as an oppositional category, in tension with another category.'⁷

The case studies for this chapter are Mikhail and Vyacheslav Durnenkov's *The Drunks* (*Pianii*, 2009) and *The Soldier* (*Soldat*, 2011) by Pavel Pryazhko. My research for this chapter is informed by attending a production of *The Soldier* at Teatr.doc in November 2012. My presence at a live performance of this play has informed my

⁵ Ross (2006) 33.

⁶ Andrews (2004) 1.

⁷ Ibid.

analysis of the production. I also benefit from access to a video recording of the performance shared with me by co-artistic director of Teatr.doc, Elena Gremina, as well as archived video recordings of the production's post-show discussions. A single camera recording also furthers my analysis of *The Drunks*, which I obtained courtesy of the Royal Shakespeare Company's collections and archives department. I am further indebted to Mikhail Durnenkov for providing me with an interview during my research of *The Drunks*, and for a number of stimulating informal conversations on the play and contemporary Russian theatre in general.

One difficulty of discussing the Second Chechen War in relation to Russian theatre is the war's significant position at the fulcrum of Putinism. As Dmitrii Muratov, editor of Russian-language newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, has lamented 'everything that has happened since then and all that is happening today is but a consequence of this war.'⁸ Writing both figuratively and literally about the consequences of the conflicts, Muratov evocatively mourns how 'the first and second Chechen wars murdered Russian democracy in its cradle.'⁹ In my consideration of how New Drama has engaged with the Second Chechen War and Putin's subsequent revivification of the military in Russian society, I frame my debate within the specific parameters of how the Second Chechen War impacted on Putin's restoration of the military in Russian public life. In contextualising the importance of the military to Putin's presidency, I follow two important studies on the Russian army and gender by Russian cultural studies scholars Maya Eichler and Valerie Sperling: *Militarizing Men: Gender, Conscription and War in Post-Soviet Russia* (2012) and *Sex, Politics and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia* (2015). Eichler and Sperling contend that Putin's authority is legitimised by his manipulation of the army to emphasise militarised notions of masculinity, foregrounding the political importance of military service and the role of soldiers and war veterans as a contested site of hegemonic masculinity in contemporary Russia. Taking these studies as a starting point, I argue that New Drama has provided one of the most exciting and pertinent challenges to this particular facet of the normative discourse of Putinism.

I begin this chapter with a synopsis of the major events of the Second Chechen War, and its importance in securing Putin's victory in the 2000 presidential election. I then identify three key consequences of the war in the development of Russian

⁸ Muratov (2014).

⁹ Ibid.

politics; the Kremlin's co-option of the mass media and silencing of critics who rejected the state-sanctioned coverage of the war, the revivification of the military, and the renewal of a debate about the role of conscription in modern Russia. Next, I introduce the research of Eichler and Sperling, and consider their use of gender theorist R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity to engage with contemporary Russian politics. After this, I examine *The Drunks* and explore how the Durnenkovs use the backdrop of the Chechen Wars to satirise and challenge the multifaceted elements of Putinism that arose as a direct result of Russia's military engagement in Chechnya. I supplement this consideration of *The Drunks* with a detailed analysis of Pryazhko's *The Soldier*. Here, I consider how the production challenges Putinism by subverting idealised stereotypes of militarised hegemonic masculinity.

Context: Putin and the Military: Chechnya and Beyond

The fulminant outbreak of the Second Chechen War in late August 1999 was a kairos moment in Putin's fledgling political career. Earlier that month, on 9 August 1999, Putin had been appointed prime minister by Boris Yeltsin, and announced that he would be standing in the 2000 presidential elections under the auspices of the Yeltsin administration. Coincident with Putin's political ascendancy was a renewal of tensions and military skirmishes in Dagestan on the Russian-Chechen boarder, as Chechen insurgents, led by military commander Shamil Basaev, violated the ceasefire effectuated at the end of the First Chechen War in 1996. Then, in September 1999, Moscow and the southern Russian cities of Dagestan and Volgodonsk were rocked by a series of bomb blasts that ripped through multiple apartment buildings, killing more than 300 civilians. These attacks on Russian soil prompted an unleashing of anti-Chechen sentiment in Russia fuelled by the saturation of graphic news reports of Basaev's invasion of Dagestan.¹⁰ Seizing on public opinion, Putin acted decisively in a demonstration of trenchant strength that would resonate with the electorate. For six months, from September 1999 to February 2000, an exhaustive Russian aerial assault pummelled Chechnya's capital Grozny and other major cities in the region. Simultaneous to this relentless carpet-bombing was a brutal ground campaign that saw Russian troops slowly encircle Grozny in the opening months of 2000. Although

¹⁰ See Russell (2005) 112-14.

the siege of Grozny ended on 8 February 2000, the Russia army continued to engage in a bloody guerilla war in Chechnya. Despite the withdrawal of the Russian army in 2002 and a handing over of power to pro-Russian Chechen forces - a period known as 'Chechenisation' - Russia did not formally conclude counter terrorism operations until 2009.

Putin viewed the Second Chechen War as the defining feature in his incipient stages of securing power in Russia. Speaking in 2000, he reflected that 'I had already decided that my career might be over, but that my mission, my historical mission – and this will sound lofty, but it's true – consisted of resolving the situation in the Northern Caucasus.'¹¹ Putin's 'historical mission' paid off, and he won a landslide victory in the presidential elections. According to a 2010 study Stephen White and Ian McAllister, Putin's popularity with the electorate increased by sixty per cent between his appointment as prime minister in August 1999 and his succession to the presidency in January 2000. White and McAllister attribute this surge in his public approval to the success of the Chechen conflict, concluding: 'it was certainly clear that Putin's vigorous prosecution of the war had been closely paralleled by a rise in his own popularity.'¹²

The war came to define not only Putin's first tentative months in power, but also his presidency and domestic policies throughout his entire first term in office from the end of 1999 to 2004. British journalist Ben Judah claims that 'Putin was as shaped by the apartment bombings and the Chechen war as George W. Bush was by 9/11 and his wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.'¹³ In the media, Putin visually aligned himself with the war effort and the Russian troops fighting on the front line, engaging in grand theatrical spectacles that included flying into Chechnya in the co-pilot seat of a Su-25 jet a week prior to the presidential elections in March 2000.¹⁴ Putin came to embody the Russian war effort: 'Though Putin has little in common with military heroes,' writes Helena Goscilo, 'the huge gallery of his PR photographs leaves no doubts that he appreciates the psychological significance of the next best thing – the spectacle of a leader wearing camouflage, owning a military-style Lada jeep, clutching weapons, and visiting army bases.'¹⁵ Goscilo points out that Putin continued

¹¹ Putin (2000) 139.

¹² White and McAllister (2010) 143.

¹³ Judah (2013) 38. A similar comparison has been made by Baev (2004) 2.

¹⁴ Lannin (2000).

¹⁵ Goscilo (2013a) 184.

to perform the role of military man of action throughout his first two terms as president. Despite the Chechen War becoming a more marginal issue after his re-election in 2004, the need for Putin to extol the militaristic values remained at the core of Putinism well into his second presidential term.

Consequences of the War

The impact of the invasion of Chechnya on Putin's popularity with the Russian electorate is pertinent to the Kremlin's growing censorship and control of the mass media. Writing in 2000 at the height of the military campaign in Chechnya, Kovalev observed that there was an 'unprecedented information blockade around Chechnya.'¹⁶ The outbreak of the war saw the first gagging of the Russian media by Putin, with reporters pressurised to capitalise on the patriotic sentiment that swept through Russia in the early months of the conflict. Putin learnt from the mistakes made by the Yeltsin administration during the first Chechen war, which had been undone by public opinion in Russia, swayed by graphic and critical news reports from the leading television networks. According to Kovalev, Putin blamed Russia's defeat in 1996 on an apostate 'fifth column' in Russian society:

It turns out that it is the human rights activists and the 'unpatriotic' press who are guilty of bringing about the defeat of the Russian army in the last Chechen war: their reports created sympathy for the sufferings of the Chechen people and thus confused public opinion. No one, by the way, accuses either human rights activists or the press of having circulated false or one-sided information. In effect, they are accused of objectively reporting on events.¹⁷

In other words, Putin viewed the accretion of an obsequious press and civil society who conformed to a pro-Kremlin narrative as decisive to the success of the Chechen campaign and his popularity with the Russian electorate. In January 2000, just two weeks after Putin succeeded Yeltsin as president, Russian war correspondent Andrei Babitsky was arrested by Russian federal forces in Grozny while reporting on the war for *Radio svoboda*, the Russian-language arm of the international news broadcaster Radio Liberty. Babitsky was detained for nearly a month, before he was exchanged

¹⁶ Kovalev (2000).

¹⁷ Ibid.

for Russian soldiers held prisoner by Chechen insurgents. A second and more high-profile example of the dangers of challenging the Kremlin's official narrative on the war was the murder of journalist Anna Politkovskaia outside her apartment in central Moscow in October 2006. Politkovskaia's courageous reporting on the Putin administration has been published in English-language translations in the books *A Dirty War: a Russian Reporter in Chechnya* and *Putin's Russia*. The murder of Politkovskaia was widely reported both internationally and in Russia and resulted in commentators making a connection between the incident and her provocative opposition to the Second Chechen War. As Stephen White observes, Politkovskaia's war correspondence 'suggested an obvious motive for the attack.'¹⁸ Although the Kremlin has never been linked to the shooting, Politkovskaia's murder was evidence that independent journalism which aimed to expose the shocking reality of the war on the ground did so with the fear of violent repercussions.

The legacy of the Second Chechen War can further be traced in the development and re-integration of the military's role in civil society by the Putin administration. According to Baev, the Second Chechen War should be viewed 'not just as an attempt by the top brass to take revenge for the defeat of three years earlier, but as part of their effort to restore the "proper" place of the army in society and check further degradation of the military structures.'¹⁹ This meant coalescing army and civil society into a relationship that had not existed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. One facet of this revivification of martial values included the re-introduction of military education into the school curriculum. This military education took the form of a programme of patriotic education in which the military took centre stage. Maya Eichler describes how these programmes, designed by the state, took

an active interest in restoring the link between military service and patriotism [and] included courses, conferences, cultural events, exhibitions, and military-sports games, and also aimed at raising the profile of patriotic themes in the media and cultural sphere²⁰

Against the background of this patriotic education program has been the rehabilitation

¹⁸ White (2011) 199.

¹⁹ Baev (2014) 23.

²⁰ Eichler (2012) 82.

of the military in public performances and spaces in twenty-first century Russia. In particular, the auxesis of the annual commemoration of the Soviet Union's victory in the Second World War on 9 May has formed a core facet of Putin's societal rehabilitation of the military in the 2000s and 2010s. The spectacle is a panoply of the country's military strength, and by proxy foregrounds the importance of Putin to Russia's re-emergence on the world stage. These colossal celebrations reached an apogee for the 70th anniversary of the end of the war in 2015. One especially notable moment during the celebrations was Putin's central participation in the Immortal Regiment (*Bessmertnii Polk*) procession, an annual Victory Day march initiated in 2011 that commemorates the memory of the Soviet participants of the Second World War. Putin walked at the anterior of the procession, joining the congregation in carrying images of their relatives who had fought in the war, as is tradition during the parade.²¹

The revivification of the military in the public sphere is not strictly limited to traditional parades and military commemoration. In 2005, the pro-Putin youth group *Nashi* (Ours) was founded with the financial backing of the Kremlin. Originally formed under the aegis of the Kremlin as a reactionary counter to the 'coloured revolutions' in Georgia and the Ukraine in 2003-2005, *Nashi's* proclivity to engage in large-scale activism and publicity stunts saw them emerge as vital propagators of Putin's public reframing of militarised patriotism.²² According to Valerie Sperling, *Nashi* and its militant wing *Stal* (Steel) recall the cultural memory of the Second World War as a means to bolster patriotism and support for Putinism among the Russian electorate. Sperling argues that 'World War II and its commemoration have been central to the legitimisation strategy of the Russian government under Putin and Medvedev and the pro-Kremlin groups who offer support for it.'²³ Especially pertinent to this study is *Nashi* and *Stal's* organisation of a number of theatrical spectacles in public spaces. These have included activists dressing in World War II uniforms to promote a new photographic exhibition that celebrated Russia's involvement in the war, and the orchestration of a gathering of sixty thousand participants in central Moscow where veterans of the Second World War symbolically

²¹ Kremlin.ru (2015). Putin carried a black and white picture of his father dressed in a naval uniform from the 1930s.

²² For further discussion on the development of *Nashi* see Horvath (2013) 99-122.

²³ Sperling (2015) 130-1.

passed the baton to the younger generation.²⁴ More recently in 2014, *Nashi* vocally backed Russia's military intervention in eastern Ukraine and the Kremlin's support of pro-Russian insurgents in the conflict.²⁵ Importantly, *Nashi's* evocation of military heroism and patriotism is achieved through the embodied presence of young activists and army veterans in military dress. As we shall see, contemporary Russian theatre makers have comparatively employed the physical presence of the male actor to challenge and subvert the idealised stereotype of the war hero to erode a crucial stanchion of Putinism. By re-integrating the military into public activism, pro-Putin youth groups have strengthened the army's position as a nexus of civil society in contemporary Russia. Specifically, the Putin regime and *Nashi* have propagated an idealised view of heroism embodied by war veterans as a paragon for young Russians. Consequently, the reframing of the military has become a contentious and polarising facet of Putinism.

Finally, crucial to a consideration of the Second Chechen War and Putin's revivification of a militarised society is the contested narrative about the Kremlin's promotion of military service and the use of conscript soldiers in Chechnya. Despite military rules barring new recruits from serving in conflict zones, conscripted soldiers were sent to fight on the front lines in Grozny and other areas of conflict. In the 1990s, Yeltsin attempted to modernise the cumbersome and out-dated Russian army, still heavily reliant on conscripted recruits. On his re-election in 1996, he pledged to reconstruct the military with the aim of ending conscription in Russia altogether, but by the start of the new millennium no progress had been made. When Russia entered into a second war in Chechnya, the armed forces were still ostensibly rooted in the model of the Soviet army, and dependant on conscripts from around Russia's vast *oblasts* (administrative regions). The Russian military differed from the Soviet Red Army 'only in that it was smaller, far more corrupt, and with no empire to patrol', according to Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, it 'remained well into the Putin era the most visibly unreconstructed Soviet institution in Russian life.'²⁶ The Kremlin made the draft a key component of their patriotic education programme and emphasised the political nature of serving in the Russian army. As Sperling contends, 'in the eyes of the Kremlin, army service and submission to military conscription are both direct

²⁴ Ibid. 131.

²⁵ Balmforth (2015).

²⁶ Baker and Glasser (2007) 198.

forms of supporting the state.²⁷

It is impossible to view these multifaceted elements of Putinism in isolation from each other. The Second Chechen War was fundamental in shaping the nascent foundations of Putinism, and provided a pretext for Putin's diminution of press freedoms and independent correspondence on the war. There was a more prominent role for the military in Putin's state-building strategy in the 2000s, which included a re-emphasis on mandatory conscription as a patriotic duty required by all young Russian men. It is primarily against this backdrop of the resurgence of the military that the scholarly study of gender politics in twenty-first century Russia has been framed. I will now turn to a discussion of two important publications in this field that consider how military service and war veterans have served as a conduit through which militarised gender norms have been reinforced.

Putinism and Militarised Masculinity

Several scholars of Russian politics have noted that the Putin administration has reinforced traditional gender identities and notions of masculinity. Two significant monographs recently published in this area of study are Maya Eichler's *Militarizing Men: Gender, Conscription and War in Post-Soviet Russia* and Valerie Sperling's *Sex, Politics and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia*. These studies provide a fascinating context to discuss how the identities of *Chechentsy* (Russian veterans of the two Chechen Wars) and conscripted soldiers have been institutionally defined and subsequently challenged in contemporary Russian theatre. Both Eichler and Sperling frame their debates within the hierarchical model of gender defined by preeminent theorist R.W. Connell as 'hegemonic masculinity'. Connell's landmark studies on gender develop her theories of hegemonic masculinity, which were originally set out in her 1987 book *Gender and Power*. Connell contends that, at any given moment and place, some forms of masculinity will be hegemonic – that is, most reified and influential – and other forms will be marginalised or subordinated. Hegemonic masculinities are established either through consensual negotiation or through power and achievement, can vary geographically, and will fluctuate over time. For example, Connell notes that the hegemonic ideal of masculinity in current Western culture is a man who is independent, risk-taking, aggressive, heterosexual, and rational.

²⁷ Sperling (2015) 129.

Hegemonic masculinity may not correspond with the everyday lives of a majority of men, but will require men 'to position themselves in relation to it.'²⁸ Connell identifies the military as the most 'important [institution] for the definition of hegemonic masculinity in European/American culture', and views the figure of the hero as central to the Western cultural imagery of masculinity.²⁹ David Morgan substantiates Connell's theories, identifying the military as significant in the defining of hegemonic masculinity:

Of all the sites where masculinities are constructed, reproduced, and deployed, those associated with war and the military are of the most direct. Despite far-reaching political, social, and technological changes, the warrior still seems to be a key symbol of masculinity.³⁰

Furthermore, Morgan contends that militarised hegemonic masculinities are performed by men at a corporeal level, specifically that 'men's bodies are predominant in public parades representing state power or military might.'³¹

Before engaging in a discussion on hegemonic masculinity in the twenty-first century, it is important to trace the narrative of masculinity and gender roles in post-Soviet Russia to provide a context for Putin's reframing of militarised gender roles. I contend that there had already been a re-appraisal of the role of men and masculinity occurring in Russia prior to the advent of Putinism, which was triggered by the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism. Sarah Ashwin asserts that during the 1990s Russian men went through what has been termed a 'crisis of masculinity' stemming from the initial loss of their role as the traditional breadwinner in the Soviet household, while their position as fathers was similarly redefined in post-Cold War society.³² Russian sociologist Elena Meshcherinka also observes that men went through a 'crisis' period after the end of communism, where they slowly 'found their feet' in the new society whereas women appeared to adapt to their new environment

²⁸ Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) 832.

²⁹ Connell (2005) 213.

³⁰ Morgan (1994) 165. Also see Frank Barrett's claims that 'militaries around the world have defined the soldier as an embodiment of traditional male sex role behaviours.' (1996) 129.

³¹ Morgan (1993) 73.

³² Ashwin argues that, despite the Bolsheviks' attempts to supplant traditional gender roles, 'male dominance was very much the norm' and women in Soviet Russia were still expected to take on the burden of child care, while men were 'encouraged to realize themselves in their work.' (2000) 11-12.

more rapidly.³³ Meshcherinka notes that it was women rather than men who made ‘the first move into the brave new world of commerce’, while many Russian men went through a period of dependence on their wives as they adjusted to the post-communist environment.³⁴ In other words, what occurred was a shifting of hegemonic masculinity to a more westernised, capitalist model, rather than the one that had developed under Soviet communism. Connell also attests to this shift in gender norms as Russia emerged into a capitalist economy, stating: ‘as the Stalinist regimes collapse and market economies were installed, Western ideologies of gender were installed.’³⁵

Since Putin’s election as president in 1999 scholars of Russian politics and culture have analysed how masculinity and gender norms have been impacted by the policies of Putinism. Sperling’s monograph is a comprehensive and detailed account of gender in Putin’s Russia, which highlights the importance of hegemonic masculinity to the augmentation of Putin’s political legitimacy among the electorate. Sperling’s research affirms that Putin’s public persona “‘undoubtedly” represents an example of hegemonic masculinity in twenty-first century Russia.”³⁶ It is from within this framework of hegemonic masculinity that Sperling contextualises the development of Putinism. Sperling’s discussion of conscription is especially relevant to this chapter. ‘Military service’ she writes, ‘is closely identified with the notion of “being (or becoming) a man.”’³⁷ Sperling identifies how the debate around conscription resulting from the Second Chechen War became a binary political discourse that was either pro or anti-Putin, and that this contested discourse is ‘inextricably bound up with gender norms.’³⁸

Alongside Sperling’s research into the Putin regime’s manipulation of gender norms, scholars have also addressed the impact of the Chechen Wars and the militarisation of society on gender identities in the twenty-first century. Eichler’s *Militarizing Men* is an important study on gender and the military in Russia that draws on interviews with *Chechentsy* to investigate ‘the relationship between men’s identities and the Russian state’s conscription policy and the waging of war in Chechnya.’³⁹ Like Sperling, Eichler argues that Putin’s ‘ability to portray an image of

³³ Meshcherinka (2000) 105-17.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 113.

³⁵ Connell (2005) 200.

³⁶ Sperling (2015) 41.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 142.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 168.

³⁹ Eichler (2012) 3.

reinvigorated masculinity' during the Second Chechen War contributed to the restoration of the military in Russian politics and public life.⁴⁰ Putin's use and appropriation of militarised masculinity helped legitimise and gain public approval for the second amongst the electorate: 'The image of the soldier became personification of Putin's appeal to the prestige of the military [...] tighter control of the media coverage during the second war meant that the image of the un-heroic conscript soldier was less visible than in the first war.'⁴¹ Because *Chechentsy* have been lionized as totemic paragons of masculinity, military service, and patriotism for Russia's younger generations, returning veterans had been coerced into conforming to a restrictive paradigm of warrior heroes. Therefore, just as Connell identifies that the warrior is an idealised hegemon that dominates over other forms of subordinate masculinities, Eichler contends that *Chechentsy* who do not conform to the hegemonic ideal of 'tough and heroic warriors' are marginalised by the Kremlin's official narrative of the war.⁴²

In the analysis of the following New Drama plays, I argue that, although each production takes a radically disparate theatrical form and structure, their analogous engagement with theories of hegemonic masculinity in their staging and dialogue calls into question the circumscribed and tendentious representations of the Chechen Wars, militarised patriotism, and conscription in Russia propagated by the Kremlin.

The Drunks

Vyacheslav and Mikhail Durnenkov have emerged as two of the most prominent and dynamic figures of New Drama. Born five years apart, the two brothers moved to the southern city of Togliatti with their family as teenagers, where their first plays were produced at the May Readings Festival at the Golosova 20 Theatre. Along with fellow playwright and friend Yuri Klavdiev, they have become known under the moniker of the 'Togliatti phenomenon' since making their respective breakthroughs in the mid-2000s. Although the pair often write alone, it was their joint effort, *The Cultural Layer* (*Kul'turnii Sloi*, 2003), which brought them to the attention of a wider theatre audience outside of Togliatti. Originally produced at the May Readings Festival, *The Cultural Layer* was subsequently performed at the Lensovet Theatre in St Petersburg

⁴⁰ Ibid. 56.

⁴¹ Ibid. 51.

⁴² Connell (1987) 61; Eichler (2012) 134.

as part of the 2004 New Drama Festival, and then at the Moscow Arts Theatre under the revised title *The Last Day of Summer* (*Poslednii Den' Leta*), directed by Nikolai Skorik. Latvian director Yana Ross describes the Durnenkovs as being 'representative of Togliatti success. Their work often balances parables and ballads with simple poetic language of the everyday.'⁴³ Their theatre is usually topical and focuses on many salient issues in contemporary Russia, including the social stagnation and decline of Togliatti after the collapse of the Soviet Union (*The Cultural Layer*), the treatment of World War II veterans in contemporary Russia (*Mutter*, 2001), and the 2014-15 Russian invasion of the Ukraine (*The War Hasn't Started Yet*, 2015). Like many New Drama playwrights, the brothers have also written for television. Along with Klavdiev, Vyacheslav Durnenkov co-authored the ground-breaking serial *School* (*Shkola*). In 2008, Mikhail Durnenkov collaborated with Teatr.doc artistic directors Elena Gremina and Mikhail Ugarov to create the TV series *Love in the Neighbourhood* (*Lubov Na Raione*) for TNT, one of Russia's most popular entertainment channels. Since 2013, Mikhail Durnenkov has further acted as the artistic director of the Liubimovka New Play Festival – the hugely popular festival of rehearsed readings staged every September at Teatr.doc that gives both new and established writers the opportunity to see their work-in-progress pieces performed.

The Drunks premiered on 21 August 2009 as part of a season of Russian-language theatre organised by the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-Upon-Avon. The festival, staged under the banner 'Revolutions: A Celebration of Theatre in Russian and the Former Soviet Union', ran between August and October 2009 and was the culmination of a project started by the RSC four years earlier by then artistic director Michael Boyd with the aim of securing a stronger and enduring dialogue between Russian and British theatre practitioners in the twenty-first century.⁴⁴ In 2005, a team of practitioners from the RSC travelled to Moscow to work with twelve specifically selected Russian and Ukrainian playwrights on a week-long series of lectures and master-classes on playwriting and dramaturgy. The delegates to Moscow included Elyse Dodgson, International Director at the Royal Court, who had joined the project as a consultant, director Dominic Cooke, and RSC Company Dramaturge Jeanie O'Hare. These workshops were intended to illuminate the dramaturgical

⁴³ Ross (2006) 2.

⁴⁴ As a young director Boyd had trained at the Malaya Bronnaya Theatre in Moscow under the eminent Soviet director Antolii Efros. For more on Boyd's debt to Efros and Russian theatre practices, see Pitches (2012) 204-8.

possibilities that emanate from Shakespeare's plays, while simultaneously encouraging the young Moscow based playwrights to engage with contemporary political and social realities in twenty-first century Russia. This burgeoning relationship resulted in the creation of nine full length scripts, and by 2009 two had been selected to be the centrepieces of the 'Revolutions' programme. Alongside *The Drunks*, Natalia Vorozhbit's history play *The Grain Store* (*Zernokhranilishche*, 2009) was selected to be staged in repertoire as a full scale production at the RSC's Courtyard Theatre. *The Grain Store* cast an epic and forceful reflection on the horrors of the *Holodomor*, when million of inhabitants of Soviet Ukraine died in the widespread famine of 1932-33, and provided a fascinating counterpoint to the Durnenkovs' contemporary satire.

The Drunks's large cast of nineteen, the use of fight and movement directors, a live group of musicians, and a team of multiple stage mangers was a departure from the cramped studio spaces where New Drama is frequently staged in Russia. As editor of *Teatr* journal Marina Davydova notes in her review of the Revolutions season, 'the plays of these young writers can only be imagined in the cellar of Teatr.doc, or similar small underground spaces.'⁴⁵ The extensive cast and less restricted playing space, however, allowed the Durnenkovs to create a large tableau of Russian provincial life, and tackle a maelstrom of social and political controversies. Despite being staged in an anomalous space from the prototypical New Drama theatres, the sardonic black humour in the play means *The Drunks* stands out as an important theatrical challenge to the official state rhetoric on the Chechen war that subverts the idealised stereotype of Putin's hegemonic masculinity.

Staging Chechnya

The Drunks is a multifaceted and ambitious piece of theatre. The play traverses a labyrinthine deconstruction of the Durnenkovs' frustrations and resentment of Russia's social and political regression under Putinism through the prism of the Chechen conflict. In an interview given with *The Times* newspaper during the play's run at the RSC, Vyacheslav Durnenkov describes that the brothers conceived the concept for the play as a response to a real life incident they encountered where a Russian soldier had returned from Chechnya to discover that he was believed to be

⁴⁵ Davidova (2009).

dead and in effect expunged from society. ‘It was a very tragic story’, Durnenkov explains; he states that the original premise for the play was their interest in ‘finishing the story, to find out what happens to [the soldier] when he comes home.’⁴⁶ This is significant because, by acknowledging a veridical premise for the play, Durnenkov places *The Drunks* in the contested political discourse emanating from Putin’s war in Chechnya. In this sense, the play echoes the urgent and provocative campaign by *Novaya Gazeta* to publish a comprehensive list of casualties from the Second Chechen War after the army refused to commission an official list of the dead. ‘The Book of Memory’ (*Kniga Pamyati*) became an important documentation of the continuing bloodshed in Chechnya that detailed the names, date of conscription, and burial place of the often perturbingly young conscript soldiers who did not return from the war.⁴⁷ By continuing the tale of a soldier’s return from war in *The Drunks*, the Durnenkovs provide an artistic and performative identity for the unnamed soldiers forgotten after the Chechen conflicts, underscoring contemporary anxieties about the state’s partisan coverage of the war, reflected in The Book of Memory.

At this point, it is useful to offer a short summary of the plot. After recently being discharged from the army on medical grounds, conscript soldier Ilya arrives back in the unnamed provincial city where he grew up in an attempt to reintegrate himself as a civilian. Although he does not view his actions in Chechnya as heroic, Ilya has been expropriated as a totemic figure of civic pride and is the unwitting cynosure of a combative local mayoral election campaign. Despite his simple motives to ‘see my son. To kill some time, go to the river. Sit and talk shit’⁴⁸ Ilya finds himself espoused as a political pawn by the three politically disparate mayoral candidates: venal and alcoholic incumbent mayor Boris Ivanovich; Kotomtsev, a bellicose police chief with a fetish for military antiques (a satirical reference to former leader of the United Russia party and then minister of civil defence, Sergey Shoygu⁴⁹); and Ilya’s old school friend Sergey, a latte sipping liberal journalist. In their scramble for power, the three mayoral candidates label Ilya a war hero, and spin his homecoming to fit

⁴⁶ V. Durnenkov in Rees (2009).

⁴⁷ An example of *Novaya Gazeta*’s Book of Memory can be seen here, dated January 31 2000. <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2000/01/31/9821-aktsiya-novoy-gazety-vtoraya-chechenskaya-kniga-pamyati> [Accessed 28 December 2016].

⁴⁸ M. and V. Durnenkov (2009) 56.

⁴⁹ Shoygu has been a long-time ally of Putin, co-founding the United Russia party that backed Putin in his 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, before Putin joined the party as leader in 2008. Shoygu has served as Russia’s Minister of Defense since 2012.

their own political narrative. The Durnenkovs' astute satire of the Russian political spectrum reminds their audience that in contemporary Russia, the Chechen War has become a politically polarising subject.

The public and political re-framing of Ilya's military past is echoed in his attempts to re-establish a relationship with his estranged wife Natasha, and young son Ivan. Eventually, Natasha rebukes Ilya for failing to secure his exemption from the draft with bribery, and she reveals to him that, during his prolonged absence, she has re-married and that she has led Ivan to believe that his father has died in Chechnya, ending Ilya's hopes of salvaging his old civilian past. Of course, it is not just Ilya who has been denied closure by the war. Natasha and Ivan have been left in limbo by Ilya's conscription and deployment to Chechnya. Natasha has been forced to make the agonising decision to expunge her husband from her life, while Ivan has lost a meaningful relationship with his father.

In the final scenes of the play Mayor Ivanovich arranges for Ilya to make a public speech to the town, convinced that Ilya's endorsement will secure his popularity with the electorate and win him the election. However, unbeknownst to Ivanovich, Ilya is also presented with two alternative speeches by Kotomtsev and Sergey that detail their own respective political manifestos. As the play concludes, Ilya stands on a large podium in the centre of his town as the audience wait to hear which candidate he will choose to endorse. Despondent at the hollow political cliques promised by each candidate, Ilya rips the speeches to pieces to the fury of Ivanovich and Kotomtsev, and the despair of Sergey.

The plot of *The Drunks* unfolds over twenty episodic scenes that depict a world in continuous and fervent flux that is inhabited by a myriad of characters and disparate political ideologies. The fast-paced scenes span multiple locations and are structurally reminiscent of television sitcoms, soap operas, and even comedy sketch shows. To this end, the Durnenkovs respond to co-artistic director of Teatr.doc Mikhail Ugarov's provocation to playwrights in 'The "New Drama" Manifesto', to engage and galvanise younger audience members by countering the artistic hegemony of imported Hollywood movies and cable television.⁵⁰ The influence of prime-time television makes the Durnenkovs' play more immediately accessible for their international audience at the RSC, and additionally calls attention to the absence of an

⁵⁰ Ugarov (2004).

artistic engagement with the Second Chechen War on the small screen in Russia. As Mikhail Durnenkov acknowledges, portraying or writing about Chechnya on television is a taboo topic, resulting in a lack of engagement with the war in Russian popular culture.⁵¹

Antithetically, *The Drunks* makes repeated references to the Chechen wars and specific conflict zones, including Grozny and Nazran. This is important in establishing the political context of *The Drunks*, because as I have noted above, there is an anxiety articulated by some Russian commentators about the manipulation and suppression of an alternative narrative to the war, resulting in what Kovalev describes as an ‘unprecedented information blockade around Chechnya.’⁵²

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the limited coverage of the Chechen Wars in the UK led British reviews of the production to marginalise the Durnenkovs’ critique of the conflict. The British critics unfailingly concluded that the plot was consciously reminiscent of Nikolai Gogol’s *The Government Inspector* (*Revizor*, 1836). ‘The message is a familiar one,’ writes Michael Billington in *The Guardian*, ‘the new Russia, like the old one, is steeped in vodka, violence and corruption.’⁵³ Billington’s interpretation of *The Drunks* as a ‘Gogolian comedy’ was echoed in Benedict Nightingale’s review for *The Times*, while the *Evening Standard* focused on the ‘corruption, egomania and lubricious booziness.’⁵⁴ The message from the British reviewers seems clear: *The Drunks* is dealing with themes of political corruption, small-town bureaucracy, and the moral impoverishment of ‘New Russia’ in the tradition of Gogol’s satire on the provincial politics of Imperial Russia. Indeed, much of the comedic potential of *The Drunks* does indeed arise from the Durnenkovs’ adroit satire on contemporary provincial life - a recurrence in many of their plays. What many of the British critics failed to establish, however, is that the fulcrum of the play’s narrative is focused around a young conscript’s return to his provincial hometown from Chechnya to learn that his civilian life has been extirpated in both public and private spheres.

Ilya’s failure to find a place in the world he returns to conforms to Russian theatre critic Elena Kovalskaya’s description of the ‘New Drama Hero’ as ‘a declassified dweller of an economically depressed city in which industry centres have

⁵¹ M. Durnenkov (2013).

⁵² Kovalev (2000).

⁵³ Billington (2009).

⁵⁴ Nightingale (2009) and Hitchings (2009).

been abandoned since *Perestroika*.⁵⁵ Unlike the archetypal protagonist of New Drama, however, Ilya is not ‘declassified’ or marginalised due to social class, age, or drug addiction. Rather, Ilya inhabits the liminal space occupied by conscript soldiers when they return to civilian society. Significantly, the Durnenkovs do not portray Ilya as a one-dimensional paradigm of an injured soldier. Instead, they present a complex and sympathetic account of the challenges confronting veterans of the Chechen wars as they attempt to reintegrate back to their previous civilian roles. The production’s examination of the social reintegration of *Chechentsy* resonates with Eichler’s argument that ‘veterans often did not conform to the ideal of tough and heroic warriors, but also found it difficult to live up to nonmilitarised notions of masculinity such as breadwinner and desirable husband.’⁵⁶ The Durnenkovs demonstrate a clear understanding of how veterans in the twenty-first century are compelled to live up to the embodied personification of the Kremlin’s restoration of militarised patriotism, facilitating the augmentation of Putin’s power. Because ‘the image of the soldier became the personification of Putin’s appeal to the prestige of the military’, *Chechentsy* are therefore defined by their position in civilian life and performance of masculinity whether hegemonic or subordinate.⁵⁷

The complex interplay between military and civilian identities is played out repeatedly in *The Drunks*. In Anthony Neilson’s production at the RSC, Ilya’s head is swathed in thick white bandages and he is enveloped in a large double-breasted military trench coat. Throughout the performance, however, the audience is able to catch glimpses of a hospital gown underneath his army uniform. This presents a conflicting juxtaposition between two institutionalised uniforms, with Ilya’s militarised exterior enshrouding his civilian hospital clothes. The physical dissimilitude of Ilya’s contrasting outfits reminds the audience of his liminal status as soldier and civilian, hero and invalid, foreshadowing some of the contradictions that are explored in the play. As will be examined in the ensuing analysis of the production, these incongruities are a vital element of *The Drunks*’s engagement with the Chechen War and Putin’s revivification of a hegemonic ideal of militarised masculinity.

⁵⁵ Kovalskaya in Weygandt (2016) 125.

⁵⁶ Eichler (2012) 134.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 51.

A Hero's Welcome: Setting the Scene

In the play's opening prologue, the audience enter the performance space to take their seats as the cast are already positioned on stage. The performers stand around the three sides of the thrust stage at the Courtyard Theatre holding shot glasses filled with vodka in their hands. It is clear to the audience that they are desperate to drink the contents of their glasses, but are unable to do so. The actors' intense concentration is broken when a performer dressed in brightly coloured rags energetically bursts onto the stage. In their stage directions, the Durnenkovs foreground the importance of the actor's paradigmatic costume, writing that the performer should be 'dressed as a traditional fool.'⁵⁸ The fool breaks the silence in the theatre by introducing the play, at which point the rest of the performers down their glasses of vodka in a toast. In this preliminary introduction to the play, the Durnenkovs appropriate from both British and Russian performance traditions. The staging at the Courtyard Theatre, makes it clear that the prologue acknowledges the legacy of the Shakespearean fool in British performance history. Furthermore, in societies that maintain long-standing Eastern Orthodox traditions, holy fools (*yurodivy*) represent a unique embodiment of anti-authoritarian protest and institutional subversion. As Priscilla Hunt argues, 'Russian holy foolishness developed a dialectical relationship with the autocratic and bureaucratic state as a cultural proactive antipode to the latter's potential for alienation and violence.'⁵⁹ The end of state-sanctioned atheism in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union facilitated a reimagining of Orthodox heritage and traditions in Russia, including holy foolishness.⁶⁰ Although the Durnenkovs' fool does not explicitly use blasphemy or the Orthodox Church as a means of authoritarian critique, the implication is that the presence of the fool on stage augurs the play's critique of contemporary Russian politics and the Chechen Wars. In their reimagining of this Russian performance tradition, the Durnenkovs signal the farcical and satirical treatment of the modern Russia state in *The Drunks*, from the vodka-soaked impotency of the final years of the Yeltsin era, to the autocratic power structure of Putinism.

The drinking of vodka shots by the actors foreshadows a further theme of the play: drunkenness. Throughout *The Drunks*, alcohol – in particular vodka – acts as a

⁵⁸ Ibid. 3.

⁵⁹ Hunt (2011) 4.

⁶⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the revival of the Holy Fool in post-Soviet Russia, see Birzache (2016) 47-79.

pervasive medicinal tranquiliser that distracts from the political and social realities of contemporary Russia. As soon as the fool announces the opening of scene one, a live band strikes up and the performers immediately become animated into life taking up various positions around the edge of the thrust stage. In one of the opening scenes of the play, Ilya negotiates his way to his seat on a moving train that is returning him from military hospital to his hometown. Eventually, he is forced to take a seat between three obviously inebriated passengers on the packed train. Attempting to persuade Ilya to drink with them, the other passengers proclaim:

This is medicine, mate. Medicine you take in very large doses. Down it. Go on. You'll feel better straight away.⁶¹

This analogy is repeated throughout the play, such as in a later scene when Ilya's old school teacher, Babitsky, attempts to convince him to drink his homemade liqueur, reassuring him that it is simply a 'medicinal dose.'⁶² It is important to note here that the play's original Russian-language title *Pyanii* literally translates as 'drunk' or 'drunken'. In *The Drunks*, drunkenness serves as a metaphor for the political acquiescence and decay that the Durnenkovs diagnose as an entrenched dysfunction in Putin's Russia. This apathy is highlighted in the train passenger's account to Ilya of the merits of drunkenness:

When I had my first drink – start of a new life. More relaxed, better at socialising, started to mingle –all that... bollocks. Don't remember the exact details, but quality of life – no comparison! I'd wake up in the morning – clueless, still shitfaced. Sit there, trying to remember what happened the night before... no fucking idea. All that was left of my memory was a sort of faded fax. Genius the memory loss you get with boozing. Past - erased!⁶³

The comical performance of these lines makes a joke of a serious observation. By playing on a perceived British stereotype that Russians are heavy drinkers, the Durnenkovs shed light on an urgent concern in modern Russia. *The Drunks* portrays a

⁶¹ M. and V. Durnenkov (2009) 7.

⁶² Ibid. 35.

⁶³ Ibid. 6.

reality where being in an ataractic stupor can heal the pain of political reality in modern life, and the play equally holds to account both the Putin administration and the apathy of the electorate as responsible for the diminution of the democratic process in Russia.

As the play develops, its ironic interrogation of contemporary Russian politics becomes more specific, exposing and observing explicit facets of Putinism with mocking derision. In another of the production's early scenes, Mayor Ivanovich stands on the platform of the town's train station that has been festooned with flowers, waiting to greet Ilya on his return from the front line and obtain a crucial photo opportunity. Unknown to Ivanovich and his entourage, however, Ilya has been arrested at the previous station after becoming incapacitated from a single shot of vodka that he accepted from the passengers. As Ivanovich waits on the platform, he invokes the memory of the Second World War and the reception given to homecoming soldiers in 1945:

When my dad came back from the war, there were flowers, the whole train was covered with flowers, the works. I thought we could put on the same sort of show. It's what you're taught in school, isn't it: 'A Hero's Welcome.' You've got to have a brass band playing, women weeping, lots of dancing.⁶⁴

Ivanovich's explicit attempt to re-enact the homecoming rituals of the Second World War in a modern context for a veteran of the Chechen conflict parodies Putin's commemoration of the Second World War as a significant legitimising strategy for the invasion of Chechnya and his own presidency. Weeks after the fall of Grozny to Russian troops in February 2000, Putin made a calculated visit to the city of Volgograd (know as Stalingrad before 1961) visiting the Mamayev Kurgan war memorial commemorating the Battle of Stalingrad and meeting with Second World War veterans.⁶⁵ Additionally, as has been detailed above, the commemoration of the Second World War has taken a prominent place in Putin's state-building.

In *The Drunks*, Ilya's planned home coming becomes an absurd comic pastiche of Ivanovich's description of his own father's return from battle. Here,

⁶⁴ Ibid. 12.

⁶⁵ Putin's visit coincided with the annual holiday 'Defender of the Fatherland Day', a veneration of Russia's armed forces and veterans.

although a band has been organised to welcome Ilya home, the musicians are visibly drunk, swaying from side to side while playing an upbeat tune. Ilya's physical absence from the celebration adds to the farcical unravelling of the spectacle. As the passengers disembark from the train, Ivanovich, desperate to be publically acknowledged in his orchestrated 'Hero's Welcome', embraces random passengers he assumes to be Ilya only to be physically rebuffed by them. The difference in cultural and social attitude towards the Chechen Wars and Russia's involvement in the Second World War has been identified by Russian film director Sulambek Mamilov:

the Great Patriotic War [Second World War], unlike the wars in Afghanistan and in Chechnya, was a nationwide war of liberation. The Soviet Union defended itself against the aggressor attacking him, and the whole country - from soldiers to civilians - knew what it was fighting for.⁶⁶

The emotional invocation of Soviet soldiers' victorious return from battle in 1945, one of the defining events in the national building of the modern Russian state, is replaced by the farcical unravelling of the scene and Ivanovich's comic desperation as he fails to salvage the celebrations.

The opening scenes of the play outline how the Durnenkovs establish the Chechen War as a backdrop to explore and satirise wider issues in contemporary Russian society. Ilya's status as a *Chechentsy* politicises the narrative of his homecoming. In the following analysis of the play's engagement with Putinism, I will show how the Durnenkovs contradict the imagined stereotypes of war veterans, and explore how this embodied theatrical incongruity chips away at the Kremlin's idealised image of hegemonic masculinity.

Ripped like Rambo: Contesting the Hegemonic in *The Drunks*

In his 2011 article, 'The problem of reality in "New Drama"' ('Problema realnosti v "novoy dramaturgii"'), Russian scholar Ivan Kuznetsov observes that the plays of Mikhail Durnenkov are characterised by an eschewal of 'sociocultural stereotypes and myths of the mass media' in contemporary Russia.⁶⁷ In other words, Durnenkov's theatre challenges the established, normative discourses propagated by the state-

⁶⁶ Mamilov (2000).

⁶⁷ Kuznetsov (2011) 36.

controlled press, exposing the realities of twenty-first century Russia on stage. Throughout *The Drunks*, Mayor Ivanovich and his aide Kosyta spin Ilya's homecoming story as an expedient to their own political goals in the impending election. In Scene 17, Ilya discusses the contents of his speech with the Mayor and Kostya, refuting their claim about where he was stationed in Chechnya:

ILYA: It says here I've been to Grozny. I've never been to Grozny. Our unit was based near Nazran. Thirty kilometres away.

AIDE: Not important. What's important is that everyone understands you respect and support the political line upheld by the head of our administration.⁶⁸

Kostya's response reveals that, in the narrative of the war, facts and truth have little relevance to the underlying political advantage that can be gained by politicians. He points to the idea that Ilya's primary purpose is to uphold a narrative espoused by the regime and respect the political status quo. A similar sentiment is also demonstrated by Ivanovich as he attempts to gain further traction for the election, directly addressing the manipulation of the media by the political class. At a meeting in his office, attended by a disparate gathering of mute and obsequious officials, the town police, and the press, Ivanovich calls to neutralise the scope and power of Sergey's newspaper and suggests replacing political contents with prosaic human-interest stories:

You know, I've just thought of a policy. We make your paper municipal [...] We'll call it *The Departmental News*. You'll cover all the dull shit we do. Demographics, ice rinks in the square, all that sort of crap. Got it?⁶⁹

These cogent sketches foreground how the Chechen wars have become a political football to exploit. They reveal how the Putin administration has constructed and manipulated the media's coverage of the Second Chechen War, doctoring the facts

⁶⁸ M. and V. Durnenkov (2009) 48.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 43.

and distracting the electorate from the brutal realities of the conflict by replacing political debate and dissent in the press with prosaic provincial news reports.

As the production unfolds, a schism occurs between the town's idealised, hegemonic expectations of a war hero, and Ilya's actual appearance and character. This contradiction between reality and the ideal is played out in Ilya's conscious rejection of the narrative that, as a soldier, he is defined by prowess in battle and that, as a surviving war veteran, he is elevated to the status of a Russian hero:

SERGEY: You're a hero. You think you're weak but you're not you're strong. You were always stronger than any of us. You've been out there fighting for your country, you sacrificed everything –

ILYA: So did a lot of people. What's so special about me?⁷⁰

In opposition to the Kremlin's official narrative of the Chechen War and the promotion of an idealised and militarised hegemonic masculinity spearheaded by Putin, Ilya does not see his status as a war hero as his *raison d'être* in society. He has not returned home seeking glory or public recognition; and has done so instead, he wishes to re-connect with his family and friends. By positioning himself as one of many soldiers glorified by the Putin regime, he asserts himself as an individual, rather than a homogenised ideal of a warrior hero. Ilya's status as a war veteran is exploited by both the state and the local media for their own agendas, as his personal and private life becomes public and political. As a surviving veteran of the war and the army, Ilya has become the property of Russia, the motherland. Because the Russian public 'were the ones who kept you in health, in our thoughts and in our prayers', Ilya has become a nebulous ideal, an emblem of heroism, and a focus of military and nationalistic pride for the population.⁷¹ He has ceased to be an individual in both the state's and the public's eyes, failing in his attempts to escape from his stigmatisation as a hero of a contentious war.

Despite Ilya's frustrated attempt to eschew normative societal expectations, the supporting characters in *The Drunks* often mistakenly impose an archetypal image of heroism and hegemonic masculinity on him. After Ilya is reunited with his old school friend Sergei in the centre of town, they relocate to a smoke-filled dive bar,

⁷⁰ Durnenkovs (2009) 57.

⁷¹ Ibid.

patronised by a group of local drunks. The action is comically interspersed by the house band's laboured covers of 1980s hits, including The B-52's *Love Shack* and Motorhead's *The Ace of Spades*, an acknowledgment of the increasing Westernisation of provincial Russia.⁷² When Ilya and Sergei enter the establishment, the barflies are engaged in a conversation about the failed party thrown by the mayor at the railway station to celebrate Ilya's return:

FIRST: Hey. Why weren't you at the station today?

SECOND: What station?

FIRST: The hero, you twat. How d'you get away with it? They herded all of us up at work. Every other person sent to the train station to give him his big welcome.

SECOND: I haven't been at work in three days.

FIRST: Oh, right.

SECOND: So, what's he like then? This hero?

FIRST: Great. Like fucking Rambo. Ripped, battle-scared.⁷³

What the second drunk does not realise is that Ilya never arrived at the station, and that the first is simply describing the hegemonic ideal of how a war hero should appear. What they are unaware of is that, although he is still dressed in military uniform, Ilya is in fact the veteran they are discussing:

SECOND: Anything like this one?

FIRST: Nah! This fucking gayboy? [*He gestures towards Ilya*] Doesn't look like a soldier to me. Looks more like a student.⁷⁴

Ilya's physical appearance and his association with Sergei, a parody of the liberal intelligentsia, is so removed from the barflies' idealised image of a war hero that they fail to realise who he is. As the audience can clearly see, Jonjo O'Neill, the actor who played Ilya in the RSC's production, is of slender build and does not physically represent the drunk's corporeal description: this comic misidentification is a clear

⁷² Music and sound designed by Nick Powell

⁷³ M. and V. Durnenkov (2009) 21-22.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 22.

expression of Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity. The first barfly's expectations of embodied militarised masculinity are offset when Ilya does not conform to them. His crude homophobic insult towards Ilya frames masculinity hierarchically, where the idealisation of the warrior hero (Rambo) acts as a paradigm of heterosexual hegemonic masculinity that marginalises and subordinates gay men.⁷⁵ By lampooning the notions of hegemonic masculinity, the Durnenkovs draw their audience's attention to the absurdity of Putin's construction of *Chechentsy* as paradigmatic of idealised military heroes comparable to action movie characters such as Rambo. The Durnenkovs' text and the embodied presence of the actor who does not conform to these stereotypes subverts Putin's revivification of the military, and by association one of the key facets of Putinism.

Arguably, the most memorable and interesting scene from *The Drunks* also uses the male body to interrogate power structures in contemporary Russia in its portrayal of the relationship between Mayor Ivanovich and police chief Kotomtsev. The scene begins as Kotomtsev seats himself in a steam-filled *banya*, surrounded by five 'subordinate' police officers who sit below him on the lower shelves of the bathhouse. Neilson's staging of this scene evokes the typical aesthetic elements of the Russian *banya*: the policemen are dressed in white towels as they lounge on the steps, while the set brims with white clouds of steam that envelopes the stage. Another member of the group holds a bunch of birch branches to massage himself with. The stratification of the bathhouse is used as an important staging device to exhibit the contemporary power dynamic that exist in twenty-first century Russia. In the opening of the scene this is made explicit through the Durnenkovs' stage directions:

*The banya. It has seven shelves. On the top sits Kotomtsev, and on the three shelves lower down, his five subordinates.*⁷⁶

As well as the staging that denotes Kotomtsev's seniority in rank as chief of police, the power he maintains over his subordinates is also sustained through the scene's dialogue:

⁷⁵ See Connell (2005) 78.

⁷⁶ M. and V. Durnenkov, 19.

KOTOMTSEV: Yesterday, right. I was shagging this big-arsed cadet. For an hour and forty minutes. How about that? Oi! Vassiliev! How long can you fuck a bird? And no fibbing. You're a shit liar

VASSILIEV (*wincing*): On average? About ten minutes.

KOTOMTSEV: Like a fucking sewing machine! Saveliev? What about you?

SAVELIEV: Twenty-three minutes, seventeen seconds, precisely. When the wife and I decided to conceive Mashka, we noted down the times. That was the average.⁷⁷

Kotomtsev's graphical use of *mat* (sexual language) to aggressively interrogate Vassiliev and Saveliev on the imitate details of their sex life articulates and flaunts the power he wields over his subordinates, which is mirrored by his position on the top step of the shelf.⁷⁸

The scene is interrupted when Boris Ivanovich and his own group of lackeys enter the bathhouse. If the production's use of the *banya* shelves to illuminate the power stratum is not yet clear, then the re-positioning of the seating positions reinforces this concept. As Ivanovich enters the space, he climbs to the top shelf and stands next to Kotomtsev looking down at him. After a tense pause, Kotomtsev very slowly and reluctantly stands up, relinquishing his position on the top step of the *banya* before climbing down a level. Again, in correspondence with the fluctuating power dynamics reinforced by the staging, the Durnenkovs' use of language in the scene also develops as the mayor and police chief discuss Ilya's mental state.

MAYOR: Don't dick me about Kotomstev. I know what the score is
[...]

KOTOMTSEV: What's the big deal? He's just a bit fucked in the head, that's all –

MAYOR: You're the one who's fucked in the head! Shut up and get on with it!⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ See Chapter one for a more detailed discussion of *mat* in New Drama.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Kotomtsev's aggressive diatribe is cut off by Mayor Ivanovich who replies with his own use of *mat* against him. The dialogue calls attention to Kovalev and Muratov's diagnoses that the Chechen War has led to a fractured and subservient political discourse in contemporary Russia, but also serves to reinforce Kotomtsev's subordination to Ivanovich. In the masculine, homosocial context of the *banya*, Kotomtsev and Ivanovich's bawdy language reflects power and dominance over women and their subordinates in the hierarchy of the town's local power structure. The production's visual reproduction of this power stratum produced an uncanny visual effect, heightened by the shrouding of the actors' bodies in smoke and the incongruous presence of props extrinsic to a *banya*, such as Kotomtsev's leather gun holster that remains strapped around his waist.

Scholar of Slavonic studies Ethan Pollock has identified that the Russian bathhouse is a longstanding site where men can 'wield power'.⁸⁰ The Durnenkovs demonstrate that, in the homosocial world of the Russian bathhouse, hegemonic masculinity is an important tool to wield social and political influence. The incongruity of this, however, is played out in the scene's corporeal focus on the men's bodies. In the revealing setting of the *banya*, the corpulent bodies of Kotomtsev and Ivanovich are physically distant from the hegemonic ideal. The two men's inability to conform to corporeal hegemonic masculinity does not inhibit their individual displays of power over their subordinates or their standing in the politicised power structure of the play. Connell presents an explanation for this seemingly theatrical contradiction:

this is not to say that the most visible bearers of hegemonic masculinity are always the most powerful people. They may be exemplars, such as film actors, or even fantasy figures, such as film characters. Individual holders of institutional power or great wealth may be far from the hegemonic pattern.⁸¹

The satirical paradox of contemporary Russia politics detailed in this scene is that individuals who supposedly conform to hegemonic masculinity such as war veterans, hold little influence or power in the political sphere. Instead they are manipulated and used as political pawns by men who are physically subordinate to the hegemonic ideal.

⁸⁰ Pollock (2010) 64.

⁸¹ Connell (2005) 77.

By engaging with the contentious subject of the Chechen Wars, the Durnenkovs reaffirm the significance of the second conflict as a defining moment of Putinism, echoing the claims of a number of Russian political commentators. In *The Drunks*'s exploration of contemporary Russia, the events in Chechnya act as a nexus for the playwrights to expose and politicise underlying issues in the early years of Putin's presidency, including nascent Russian democracy, political corruption, the venality of politicians, and rising societal tensions. In the context of the Kremlin's co-option of the Russian media to produce a sanitised narrative of the war tendentious to Putin's grip of power, *The Drunks*' satirical treatment of the war stages an important counter-narrative that disrupts the regime's restoration of militarised patriotism. In the following section I will explore how - despite taking a disparate theatrical form - *The Soldier* reproduces this vital artistic engagement with Putinism.

The Soldier

The continued use of conscripted soldiers by the Kremlin in the Second Chechen War brought a renewed debate about, and foregrounding of, desertion by young men who did not want to serve in the Russian army.⁸² In their study on contemporary Russian politics, Baker and Glasser conducted vital research into desertion in the Russian army in the 2000s, linking the rising phenomenon to the violent hazing of young conscripts by their seniors known as *dedovshchina*.⁸³ This brutal aspect of military service that has been ingrained into the Russian army since before the disintegration of the Soviet Union has been linked to a list of shocking statistics, prompting Politkovskaia to ask the question: 'what would you think of an Army in which, in a single year, 2002, a battalion, more than 500 men, had been killed not fighting a war but from beatings.'⁸⁴ Richard Sakwa further records that, 1000 conscript soldiers a year committed suicide throughout the 2000s 'as a result of various barbaric initiation ceremonies and *dedovshchina*.'⁸⁵ It is within this context that Pavel Pryazhko's *The Soldier* raises urgent questions about the purpose of the Russian army's continuing policy of conscripting young men.

⁸² As recently as July 2015, the Russian media covered the story of two members of the Russian navy who jumped off their cruiser into the Mediterranean sea in an attempt at desertion. See gazeta.ru (2015).

⁸³ Baker and Glasser (2004) 198.

⁸⁴ Politkovskaia (2004) 3.

⁸⁵ Sakwa (2008a) 396.

Born and raised in Minsk, Belarus, Pryazhko is the only non-Russian playwright examined in this thesis. Despite continuing to be based in Minsk, Pryazhko's plays have achieved critical success at Russian theatres in Moscow and St Petersburg, as well as outside of the former Soviet Union. He emerged as an important voice in Russian-language playwriting in the mid-2000s finding success when the Free Theatre in Minsk staged a series of his work including *Panties (Trusi, 2007)* in 2007, which won the grand prize at the International Competition of Contemporary Playwrights in Minsk and was performed in Moscow in the same year. Pryazhko's diverse output spans longer texted-based productions, including *Panties* and *Life is Grand (Zhizn Udalas, 2009)*, staged at Teatr.doc under the direction of Mikhail Ugarov, to shorter performances that play with theatrical form and challenge the structure of New Drama: *I am Free (Ya Svoboden, 2012)*, produced by the Post Theatre in St Petersburg, took the form of the projection of 535 photographs captured by Pryazhko in Minsk which were accompanied by thirteen captions, sequentially projected every seven seconds to create a complete, unspoken story. *I am Free* is one of a large number of fruitful artistic collaborations between Pryazhko and Russian director Dmitrii Volkostrellov. Born in Moscow, Volkostrellov moved to St Petersburg to train at the Russian State Institute of Performing Arts under the world-renowned theatre director Lev Dodin. Volkostrellov is the artistic director of Post Theatre, which he founded in 2011 in St Petersburg. The theatre does not operate out of a single building, but instead uses alternative, non-theatrical urban edifices, such as disused office blocks and nightclubs in a similar form to London-based, site-specific theatre company Theatre Delicatessen.⁸⁶

The Soldier is another collaboration between Pryazhko and Volkostrellov, staged as a joint production between Teatr.doc and the Post Theatre, with the single role in the piece performed by the actor Pavel Chinarev. Depending on the performance, the production lasts roughly ten to fifteen minutes with an post-show discussion that typically exceeds the duration of the play. Despite the ephemeral length of the production, *The Soldier* became a paramount performance in Teatr.doc's repertoire. In 2013, the performance was nominated for a golden mask – the national theatre award for drama, opera, ballet and modern dance – in the 'experiment' category, and, in 2015, the play was included in a list compiled by *Teatr* journal of the

⁸⁶ Another example of Post Theatre's use of site is Volkostrellov's staging of Pryazhko's play *Parks and Gardens (Parki I Sadi, 2014)* in the park of Sheremetev Palace in central St Petersburg.

most important productions staged at Teatr.doc.⁸⁷ The show premiered at Teatr.doc on 23 December 2011, and was staged in an unused office space next to the theatre's main performance space, which is where I saw the production in November 2012. The tight square room had only basic technical equipment for a theatrical production and could hold a crowd of no more than roughly twenty audience members. The promotional material for the production on fliers, Facebook, and Teatr.doc's website propounded a provocative and original performance, reminding the audience of the performance's short running time and including a quote from Ugarov describing the play as 'the most radical performance of the Russian theater!'⁸⁸ In my discussion of the production of *The Soldier* at Teatr.doc, I shall consider the ways in which the 'radical' nature of the play accrues from both its unconventional structure and Pryazhko's engagement with the Kremlin's policies of militarised patriotism and masculinity.

'He did not go back the army'

The house lights are turned off on the small congregation gathered at Teatr.doc's second space, and the audience's attention is immediately drawn to the sound of running water occurring somewhere off stage. Initially, it is unclear if this is part of the show, but the answer is soon revealed by the broadcast of a live video feed that begins to play on a large projection screen hanging on the back wall of the space. On the screen, the audience sees a video of a naked young man with short, cropped blonde hair standing under a running shower. Most audience members will already be aware of the production's title, so the obvious assumption made at this point in the performance is that the man who is visible in the film is a young soldier in the Russian army. The audience becomes aware that they are engaging in an act of voyeurism on a private moment of intense reflection as they watch the man, who is only filmed from the waist up, slowly and assiduously washing himself. As he showers, the young soldier appears to be caught in emotional turmoil. For long periods of time, he stands directly under the showerhead staring upwards towards the ceiling in contemplation, spitting out the shower water that runs into his mouth. At other moments, he paces around the small cubical, conveying what appears to be an inexorable and unspeakable anxiety.

⁸⁷ Matvienko (2015).

⁸⁸ Teatr.doc (2011).

At this point in the performance, I felt that the actor's staged unease was mirrored by my own discomfort at witnessing this intimate act of ablution unfold. This unease was also provoked by the theatrical anomaly of the performer's absence from the stage and our only access to the action manifesting through the medium of film. This physical barrier between the actor's actions offstage creates a frisson of anticipation as the audience wait for a revelation into the psyche of the character. In one review of the production, Marina Raikina, arts editor of daily tabloid newspaper *Moskovskij Komsomolets*, describes her experience of watching the performance and trying to consider the antecedent events to justify the man's agitation. She contends that it immediately raises questions about the negative perception of the army in contemporary Russia.⁸⁹ While the performance never explicitly excoriates the policies of Putinism, the filming of an actor taking a shower offstage invites the audience to consider how the character's assumed identity as a young soldier impacts on their consideration of his motives. As has been outlined above, the military has become a site of contested political narratives accruing from Putin's prominent revivification of the military in civil society. Through just a title and the projected film of the habitual act of washing, the play already provokes important considerations of Putinism and a salient anxiety in contemporary Russian politics and society.

After around five minutes, the man turns off the shower and reaches for a towel that has been hanging out of shot. He undertakes the task of drying himself with the same sedulous attention as when washing, starting with his hair and meticulously working his way down his torso. The diurnal action played out in a typical domestic setting means that the audience search for meaning in every action taken by Chinarev. Theatre critic John Freedman observes that 'Volkostrelov had attuned our sense of hearing to nuances with the long, monotonous, but not entirely repetitive sound of running water [...] helping us to construct a detailed narrative in our minds.'⁹⁰ Simultaneously, the detailed tight shot of the actor's face and upper body irradiates every facial expression and physical action in greater clarity than if he was present on stage, highlighting the somatic narrative of Pryazhko's play. The structure of the performance implies that, from the very start of *The Soldier*, the audience's attention is focused on the corporeal semiotics of the actor's body.

⁸⁹ Raikina (2011).

⁹⁰ Freedman (2014b) 51.

At this point in the performance, a spotlight is slowly raised on a small section of the performance space, illuminating the single piece of set dressing in the room: an office chair with an army uniform neatly folded over it. With the towel now wrapped around his waist the soldier emerges from the shower room and into the corridor becoming visible in the flesh to the audience for the first time. In this precise moment, he can be glimpsed both standing down the corridor while also still visible on the video stream, confirming to the audience that the projection they have been watching is live. He silently walks down the narrow hallway towards the audience in an understated manner before turning right into a second room that is again hidden from sight. Unlike the shower room, however, this area is not filmed, and instead the audience must rely only on the sounds that he makes to infer the actions that are occurring. Although obscured from view, the sounds that emanate from the adjacent room are clear for everyone to recognise: a microwave is being turned on and a hot drink is prepared. At this point, Volkostrelov inserts a deliberate lacuna in the physical narrative of the performance, as unlike in the shower scene, we cannot see the young man's actions or expressions in this second room. I was left wondering if something happened in that moment un-witnessed by the audience that could have impacted on the character's final actions in the play.

These final moments occur as the young man enters the corridor again, standing at the entrance to the main performance space facing the audience. Under the bright spotlight he is still visibly wet from his preceding shower and remains undressed apart from the towel that conceals his body below the waist. Despite his heightened vulnerability, standing almost naked in front of an expectant crowd, he appears calm and collected, leaning against the door and surveying the room. After the prolonged silence, the audience hang on every word as finally he speaks slowly and purposefully, delivering the play's two brief lines:

The soldier came home on leave. When it came time to return to the army, he did not go back to the army.⁹¹

He then steps back closing the door behind him, as the room fades to a black out.

⁹¹ I use John Freedman's translation of Pryazhko's lines as included in *Real and Phantom Pains: An Anthology of New Drama* (2014). 110.

Silence and Debate: *The Soldier* in the New Drama Canon

The first question that needs to be addressed in a consideration of *The Soldier* in a study of New Drama and Putinism is: how can a piece of theatre that eschews a conventional written playtext be included in the canon of New Drama, an idiom that specifically privileges the importance of language and the re-emergence of the playwright in contemporary Russian theatre? As examined earlier in this thesis, New Drama is a mercurial artistic term that describes manifold productions and theatrical genres. Pryazhko himself asserts that New Drama can take varied theatrical forms and is defined by its consideration of the ‘everyday individual experience. The language and structure of the text can take any form you want. It's not about them.’⁹² Theatre critic Pavel Rudnev has elaborated on this explanation, observing that Pryazhko’s theatre is directly responsible for the evolution of the New Drama repertoire and the theatrical conventions that define it:

Pryazhko was able to change the course of development of modern plays in Russia. He turned the ‘New Drama’ from the drama of the theme and the drama of the language, to a discussion around the structure of the modern play. He made the form of the text and the language of the play topics for discussion. Prior to Pryazhko, the ‘New Drama’ was clinging, first of all, to plots, boundary conditions.⁹³

In other words, Pryazhko’s playful deconstruction of the established conventions of playwriting in twenty-first century Russia has resulted in the enlivening of a debate about the form and codification of New Drama. In a further consideration of the play’s standing in the canon of New Drama, I also contend that Pryazhko’s engagement with the political and social realities of Putinism, and the staging of a counter-narrative contra to the Kremlin, further coalesces *The Soldier* with the diverse body of New Drama productions examined in this thesis.

In an interview given with journalist and theatre director Tatyana Artimovich, Pryazhko discusses the original concept for the play: ‘I began to build a story,’ he contends, ‘I followed the conventions of plot construction and created some characters [...] and suddenly I realised that what I needed was only two sentences,

⁹² Pryazhko (2011a).

⁹³ Rudnev (2010).

and that this was the only option.⁹⁴ By condensing the show to fifteen minutes of action and two lines of text, Pryazhko directly addresses contemporary anxieties surrounding the Russian military, conscription, and desertion. The condensed performance directs the audience to consider the importance of the soldier's reticence during the piece. The communicative silence in *The Soldier* opens and augments potential reflection on the Russian military's contentious engagements in Chechnya, described by Mikhail Durnenkov in 2009 as 'an unhealed wound - it is more of a tragedy than ten years of Afghanistan. The wounds are still fresh and it holds a very specific position in Russian memory and cultural trauma.'⁹⁵ The play has been acknowledged as one of the most politically provocative productions of the twenty-first century. Theatre scholar Maria Shevtsova interprets *The Soldier* as 'protest at its most matter-of-fact; protest that could not be denied.'⁹⁶ Writing in *Teatr* journal, Elena Levinskaya similarly contends that the play is an act of fulmination and a provocative 'manifesto, a radical gesture of refusal [...] a gesture of rejection of obsolete institutions.'⁹⁷ By playing on specific unease and questions surrounding Putin's militarisation of the public sphere, *The Soldier* acts as a conduit for raising political debate through its evocation of Russia's bloody involvement in the Second Chechen War, *dedovshchina*, and conscription. Although the performance does not explicitly name or list these subjects, what is significant in the play's exploration of contemporary attitudes towards the Russian army is that the act of desertion by a young soldier asks an important question in contemporary Russia: should the country's youth have the choice about whether to serve in the army or not?

In an attempt to explore this, *The Soldier* does not offer up an explicit answer to the question it poses. Instead, Pryazhko and Volkostrelov encourage their audience to fill in their own narrative for the soldier's actions during the performance.⁹⁸ I contend that the production's form, which challenges preconceived notions of New Drama, is vital in generating a discourse about the role of the military in contemporary Russian life. In their study of New Drama, Beumers and Lipovetsky conclude that 'the plays discussed in this volume render violence of trauma through language, through the interaction between characters, and through the organisation of

⁹⁴ Pryazhko (2011b).

⁹⁵ M. Durnenkov (2009).

⁹⁶ Shevtsova (2015).

⁹⁷ Levinskaya (2012) 27.

⁹⁸ In his article on Pryazhko and Volkostrelov's theatre, Freedman describes how 'two years after seeing *The Soldier* [...] I debate questions the director raised but did not answer.' (2014b) 53.

theatrical performance.⁹⁹ In *The Soldier*, it is precisely the lack of ‘language’ or dialogic ‘interaction’ that communicates a potential embodied narrative to the audience. The soldier’s communicative silence throughout the performance hints at an ineffable trauma suffered by the young man that provokes important and varied discussion on the role of the army in modern Russia.

Each performance of *The Soldier* is followed by a post-show discussion between the audience, the creative team, and staff members at Teatr.doc. Although the production provokes a series of questions relating to the soldier’s actions and his decision to desert the army, the post-show discussions often start with an emotive and heated debate about the form of the production. For example, in the post-show discussion that took place on the show’s opening night, audience members interrogated Pryazhko, Volkostrelov, and Ugarov.¹⁰⁰ For some audience members, the form the performance took was artistically provocative and at odds with their perception of theatre, with one speaker asking ‘how is this a viable format of theatre?’ A second raised the issue that they did not believe they had watched a piece of theatre, instead contending that ‘this is a movie’, while another jokingly asked for a refund of their money. The conversations about the performance’s format often facilitate a more detailed debate on the Russian military. In the post-show discussions I have access to and have witnessed at the theatre, many of the men in the audience respond to the play by animatedly sharing their own experiences of military service, recalling where they were based and considering the impact it had on their lives. By challenging the audience’s expectations of what a theatre performance is, *The Soldier* provokes a debate on the nature of the performance that subsequently facilitates a wider dialogue about the Kremlin’s privileging of the military in Russia. In this way, *The Soldier* acts as a locus of cathartic reflection for audience members to consider the impact of conscription not only in a theatrical context, but also its impact on themselves and their companions at Teatr.doc that evening. By doing so, Pryazhko and Volkostrelov provoke the consideration of both the plight of soldiers in Russia, but also the role of theatre in challenging the normative discourses of the Putin regime.

⁹⁹ Beumers and Lipovetsky (2009) 301.

¹⁰⁰ I am grateful to Elena Gremina for sharing with me a number of recordings of the post-show discussions staged at Teatr.doc.

A further observation in the context of my analysis of Putinism earlier in this chapter, is that, in a society where individuals who criticise the military are labelled as unpatriotic members of a treacherous fifth column, the ability of *The Soldier* to rouse an anomalous public debate about the failings of the army is in itself a vital and important act. Additionally, by prompting the audience to share their own and their friends and family member's accounts of military service, which often do not confirm to Putinism's idealised construction of militarised patriotism, these debates facilitate the eschewal of hegemonic masculinity of the Putin administration on multiple levels. As Connell argues, 'hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to women and to subordinated masculinities', meaning that the hierarchical framework of hegemonic masculinities privileges male dominance over women, but also dominance over men who do not conform to the idealised stereotype.¹⁰¹ In the democratic space at Teatr.doc, where all members of the audience are given equal time to freely speak in a discussion moderated by the theatre's creative team, the hegemonic masculinity of the Putin regime is once again challenged.

Embodied Narratives and Hegemonic Masculinity

As I observed earlier in this chapter, hegemonic masculinity has been utilised as a decisive legitimising tool for Putin's presidency. Pro-Putin youth groups such as *Nashi* have engaged in live spectacles that promote the hegemonic ideal of the war veteran as warrior hero and reinforce the idea that military service is allied to the concept of becoming a 'real man'. The embodied presence of the male actor in *The Soldier* intersects with the Putin regime's employment of media-friendly PR stunts and youth activism on the streets of Russia. By challenging the connection between hegemonic masculinity and the success of the Putin regime, the production aims to disrupt the state-sanctioned discourse that ignores and marginalises young men who do not conform to hegemonic masculinity.

The soldier's body in the form of actor Pavel Chinarev is visible to the audience during almost the entire performance both on stage and through the live video stream. Through the projection of the video stream, Pryazhko and Volkostrelov highlight how the coverage of military intervention such as the Second Chechen War and martial parades have become highly mediated by the state through the Kremlin's

¹⁰¹ Connell (1987) 61.

co-option of the mass media. As I have noted, during the Second Chechen War, Putin completed a number of high profile macho stunts that aligned him with the war effort and attempted to propagate him as the icon of militarised hegemonic masculinity. Meanwhile, veterans from both the Second World War and the two Chechen Wars have been foregrounded in the public sphere as patriotic heroes who validate Putin's emphasis on military values and conscription. Paradoxically, Pryazhko and Volkostrellov challenge these idealised stereotypes of militarised masculinity in the embodied enactment of the everyday tasks performed by the soldier. Volkostrellov's directorial focus on the diurnal actions of the character asks the audience to interpret the production as more legitimate than the heavily constructed and choreographed representations of military vigour presented by pro-Putin youth groups, state news reports, and Putin's own public performances during the Second Chechen War.

The image of the naked male body in the production has further implications for how Pryazhko and Volkostrellov use the embodied presence of the actor to engage with militarised gender norms. When he exits the shower, the audience's attention is focused not only on the actor's body but also the green camouflage uniform that is deliberately positioned in their eye line stage left. In her article 'The Structure of Plasticity: Resistance and Accommodation in Russian New Drama', Slavonic scholar Susanna Weygandt argues that New Drama productions integrate 'material objects as actants in the narrative.'¹⁰² In *The Soldier*, the material presence of the soldier's military uniform acts in accordance with Weygandt's observations on the contribution of objects in New Drama. Lighting is used to introduce the presence of the items halfway through the performance and Volkostrellov creatively uses the uniform as a way to progress the narrative of *The Soldier*. The neatly folded clothes hint that the soldier had laid them out planning to dress after his shower only to conceive his final courageous decision to desert the army during the action of the piece. The presence of the soldier's uniform reflects Morgan's observation that 'often men in public space are, officially or unofficially, uniformed as soldiers, policemen, clergy or stockbrokers.'¹⁰³ Morgan writes that 'the function of uniform is then to divert attention away from the particularities and idiosyncrasies of specific bodies and to focus on generalised public roles and statuses.'¹⁰⁴ In their public media stunts, Putin

¹⁰² Weygandt (2016) 121.

¹⁰³ Morgan (1993) 73.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

and *Nashi* activists dress in military attire to codify and give authority to their performance of militarised masculinity. It is precisely through the actor's naked body that resistance to this facet of Putinism is conducted in *The Soldier*. The live embodiment of a naked man stripped of his uniform and status as a soldier is, therefore, a transgression that strips away the Kremlin's fabricated mediatisation of militarised hegemonic masculinity.

It is worth pointing out, that like Ilya in *The Drunks*, the soldier's body does not in fact physically conform to the hegemonic ideal and Morgan's claim that 'the warrior still seems to be a key symbol of masculinity.'¹⁰⁵ Chinarev's body is not muscular or physically imposing, and his appearance betrays a youthful inexperience that suggests his subordinate status in the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity. If Pryazhko's soldier does not conform to hegemonic ideals, then it raises the question of what type of masculinity is coded in his image? An answer is provided by James Messerschmidt's definition of 'oppositional masculinities': 'at times and under certain social conditions men and women construct oppositional masculinities and femininities that in one way or another are extrinsic to and represent significant breaks from hegemonic and emphasized patterns, and may actually threaten their dominance.'¹⁰⁶ Although the body of the soldier does not relate to embodied notions of the warrior hero that defines contemporary hegemonic masculinities, his concluding statement of intent, and his confident stance as he delivers his message, rejects the hegemonic as well as opposing it. The soldier's words are empowering. He is taking control and taking decisive action to subvert and resist Putin's militarised rhetoric.

Conclusion

The legacy of the Second Chechen War has cast a prominent and enduring shadow over the development of the Russian state in the twenty-first century. As Dmitrii Muratov soberly reflected in 2014: 'all that is happening today is but a consequence of this war.'¹⁰⁷ The war consolidated Putin's nascent presidency and enabled the Kremlin to purge the independent media empires that had emerged in the 1990s in a rescinding of press freedoms. In addition, the Kremlin recognised the value that

¹⁰⁵ Morgan (1994) 165.

¹⁰⁶ Messerschmidt (2004) 44.

¹⁰⁷ Muratov (2014).

militarised patriotism held in consolidating Putin's grip on power by demonising a supposed fifth column that did not obsequiously conform to these principles.

I have argued that New Drama is a complicated and expansive term that describes manifold theatrical styles and forms. The two productions examined in this chapter are widely divergent in their construction of narrative, staging, acting techniques, language, and even the spaces in which they were originally performed. *The Drunks* specifically takes the Chechen Wars as a starting point for its cynical, satirical, and often comical examination of contemporary Russian society. Contrastingly, *The Soldier*'s urgent portrayal of a young soldier in the moment he takes the life-changing decision to desert the army assaults its audience's pre-conceived understanding of New Drama and the artistic role of the playwright in contemporary Russia. What unites these two productions is that they both constitute a powerful response to Putinism by placing the figure of the conscript soldier on stage. Despite their disparate theatrical forms, both plays are framed by their relationship to hegemonic masculinity as theorised by Eichler and Sperling. *The Drunks* and *The Soldier* use the embodied presence of the male actor to challenge and disrupt the idealised paradigm of militarised hegemonic masculinity promoted by Putinism. In a society where soldiers who do not conform to the regime's constructed hegemonic masculinity are excluded from public discourse, these production open up new avenues for debate and opposition towards the Kremlin through the staging of marginalised voices and 'subordinate' representations of the male body.

In the following chapter, I will examine the consequences of the expanding class and regional divide under the Putin administration as depicted in two plays by Vasily Sigarev. *Plasticine* (*Plastilin*, 2000) and *Black Milk* (*Chernoie Moloko*, 2001) expose the realities of provincial eastern Russia to their Muscovite audiences, establishing unique and varied counter-narratives that focus on marginalised sections of society at the turn of millennium. Analogous to the two productions discussed in this chapter, these plays respond to a key facet of Putinism, foregrounding forgotten elements of Russian society who have been disempowered by Putin's state-building of the 2000s.

Chapter Four: Social Divide and the Provinces in the Theatre of Vassily Sigarev

Introduction

As I have argued in the previous chapters, New Russian Drama has been shaped by and adapted to the political, social, and cultural landscape under Putinism. These dramatists have challenged the established, normative discourses of Putinism presented in the Russian media and by Putin himself in a variety of disparate theatrical techniques, which all fall under the idiom of New Drama. In Chapter Two I examine how theatre makers have employed political satire to make sense of Putin's presidency and challenge the normative discourse of Putinism, considering satire's evolution during the Putin era. Chapter Three explores how playwrights have responded to the Second Chechen War, demonstrating how New Drama has subverted the revivification of militarized gender identities under Putinism and the patriotic rhetoric that saturated the Russian media during Putin's first administration. In keeping with the focus of this thesis, this chapter considers how New Drama addresses the expanding class divide created under Putin. Despite an economic upturn throughout the 2000s, precipitated by an increase in the international price of oil, a market in which Russia has a significant share, under the Putin administration the disparity in living standards across the majority of the country has grown and according to a recent study referenced by *The Guardian* newspaper, 16% of the population currently live below the poverty line.¹

Through an analysis of Yekaterinburg based playwright Vassily Sigarev's *Plasticine* (*Plastilin*, 2000) and *Black Milk* (*Chernoie Moloko*, 2001), this chapter examines how these plays challenge the normative discourse of Putinism, which suggests that the 2000s were characterised by stability, contrasting with the social and economic chaos of the Yeltsin era.² Premiering in 2001 and 2002 respectively, *Plasticine* and *Black Milk* are the two earliest case studies in this thesis. Despite being written during the nascent years of Putin's premiership, they are important productions for theorising and understanding how New Drama has engaged with the politics of Putinism.

¹ Walker (2017).

² Both plays have been published in English-language translations by Sasha Dugdale.

The staging of impoverished and marginalised communities across Russia is considered a critical component of New Drama productions in the 2000s. Throughout the decade, economic stagnation in the former industrial heartlands of the Soviet Union was a regular thematic trope in new theatre writing, and productions depicted urban areas in the provinces of Russia as financially and morally destitute.³ For example, Russian theatre critic Elena Kovalskaya writes that ‘often the “New Drama Hero” is a declassified dweller of an economically depressed city in which industrial centers have been abandoned since *Perestroika*. The hero living here is usually an adolescent.’⁴ Despite, however, the connection between the economic hardship experienced by provincial communities in post-Soviet Russia and under the Putin administration, the important intersection between contemporary Russian politics and Sigarev’s theatre is an element of his plays that has yet to be explored.

Reflecting the contemporaneous anxieties articulated by a collection of Russian journalists and cultural critics, urban decay, crime, poverty, and social deprivation became the prevailing characteristic of many writers’ plays and New Drama productions. At the time, Russian critics suggested that such motifs were designed merely as shock value, and contrived primarily to please foreign audiences and mimic Western theatre aesthetics.⁵ This fascination with the lurid aspects of provincial existence in early New Drama plays was not necessarily surprising and can be further explained by considering the original geographical locations of many of the writers of New Drama. As has already been examined in Chapter 1, although the focus of this new wave of playwriting was on the productions staged at theatres in central Moscow, young playwrights also emerged from provincial cities far removed from the capital, both economically and culturally. Furthermore, The introduction of contemporary social motifs to the Russian stage lead to claims that playwrights had assimilated themes and aesthetics from foreign theatre cultures, and specifically the British phenomenon of ‘In-Yer-Face’ theatre that emerged from London’s Royal Court theatre in the 1990s. As Yana Ross summarises:

the influence of the Royal Court cannot be underestimated. Russian characters

³ Some examples are: Vladimir and Oleg Presniakov, *Europe – Asia (Yevropa – Aziya)*, 2000); Vyacheslav and Mikhail Durnenkov, *The Cultural Layer (Kul'turnii Sloi)*, 2003); Yuri Klavdiev, *Anna* (2004).

⁴ Kovalskaya in Weygandt (2016) 125.

⁵ See Otkasatsia ot... (2004)

now swear, screw, murder, and suffer in violent outbursts addressing the ‘in-
yer-face’ issues of poverty, frustration, alcoholism, and social injustice.⁶

Through an analysis of *Plasticine* and *Black Milk* this chapter will contest the argument that Sigarev’s theatre is thematically rooted in the tradition of ‘In-Yer-Face’ theatre, and based on shock tactics and the exploitation of rural Russia for box office success in Moscow and the West. Instead, I argue that the productions are framed within an explicitly Russian context, drawing from Russian and Soviet history to interrogate the politics of the twenty-first century.

This chapter begins by examining the Kremlin’s continued implantation of neo-liberal economic policies and the emerging class system in Russia that was bolstered at the beginning of Putin’s presidency. I reflect on Russian political scientist Lilia Shevtsova’s observation that the divide between the ‘haves and have-nots’ has rapidly grown under Putinism.⁷ I supplement this by considering how critics of the Putin regime, including politician Alexi Navalny and journalist Anna Politkovskaia, have underscored the impact of social divide throughout Russia in their oppositional discourse. Next, through a close reading of *Plasticine*, I explore how Sigarev stages provincial life to expose the growing divides in the living standards of Russians and foregrounds those marginalised and excluded from public discourse and space. Following *Plasticine*, this chapter considers how *Black Milk* addresses the polarity between Russia’s prosperous western metropolises such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, and the country’s provinces in the south and east.

A Divided Society

Scholar of contemporary Russian politics, Stephen White, identifies the prevailing preoccupation that has concerned ordinary Russians during the Putin era as ‘above all, the rapid increases that were taking place in the cost of living, and in the poverty and social inequality with which they were associated.’⁸ In the transitional decade following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia suffered a dramatic downturn in its citizens’ wellbeing and standards of living. Under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, life expectancy dropped, access to healthcare and education decreased, job security –

⁶ Ross (2006) 38

⁷ Shevtsova (2005) 332

⁸ White (2011) 224.

once taken for granted under the Soviet regime - was eroded, and by the end of the 1990s there were over four million people homeless throughout the country. The situation was exacerbated by the collapse of the ruble in August 1998 and the consequent financial crisis that resulted in a further drop in living standards, leaving millions living below the poverty line. Although the large western cities in Russia, including Moscow and St Petersburg, suffered during the initial recession, provincial towns and cities bore the brunt of the economic downturn. White highlights that in ‘whole towns like Yuzha, 200 miles west of Moscow [...] four out of every five were living below the poverty line in the late 1990s and many of the unemployed, elderly and sick were too poor to have regular meals.’⁹ This economic depression in the east of Russia was heightened by the collapse of many of the Soviet Union’s traditional industries, which caused further unemployment and hardship in Russia’s industrial heartland to the south-east of Moscow. Furthermore, Russian political scientist Elena Chebankova has observed that a trend in Western societies that has been followed in Russia since the implementation of neo-liberal, economic policies by the Kremlin is the emergence of a ‘functional underclass’, a taxonomy that Chebankov defines as a ‘derogatory umbrella term uniting people suffering from multiple forms of deprivation’.¹⁰

Putin’s victory in the presidential election in March 2000 coincided with the global oil boom that augmented the Russian economy. In his book *Change in Putin’s Russia: Money, Power and People*, Russian historian Simon Pirani writes that the increase in the price of oil at the turn of the millennium was essential to Putin’s securement of power, and his continued success and popularity with the Russia electorate. Pirani further suggests, however, that while Putin’s policies in the wake of the oil boom raised average incomes and living standards from their depths in the 1990s, they also exacerbated the economic inequalities rampant in post-Communist Russian society:

The gaps between rich and poor, and between rich and poor regions, widened. The demographic crisis persisted, with death rates still higher than those of the mid-1980s. Health, education and social welfare reforms, guided by right-wing ‘market’ principles, introduced new inequalities. Worst of all, the

⁹ Ibid. 183.

¹⁰ Chebankova (2012) 68.

government failed to apply Russia's oil windfall to the most pressing problems.¹¹

Putinism focused on modernising European Russia in the west to the detriment of provincial cities in the north and south of the country, which experienced an escalation of poverty and social deprivation in the 2000s. Indeed, Putin's first two administrations between 2000 and 2008 saw the per capita GDP in Moscow and St Petersburg grow to three to nine times greater than the average in the poorest 20 regions.¹² This differential in income and living standards has resulted in a fissure in Russia society. As sociologist and activist Carine Clement writes:

Russia is more and more being divided into two camps. There are those who can make their plans for the future, who feel the effects of stability and improvement of living standards. And there are those who despite all the improvements, feel they are in a precarious situation. Something happens – and they can sink. They are not the poorest, but they live just a little above the poverty line. This is the layer of the population that suffers most from the government's social reforms.¹³

In other words, while Putinism has resulted in many Russians seeing an improvement in their living standards, which had dropped sharply in the 1990s, the gap between those who can afford to indulge in new-found Western consumerism and those who can't has augmented.

Such groups include both the young and pensioners, who have been marginalised by many of the Kremlin's welfare policies and social reforms. This is a reflection of a nascent and still fluctuating class system, which has seen the rapid growth of the middle class.¹⁴ Chebankova notes that this increase in a middle class who embrace post-Soviet consumerism has resulted in the prepotency of public discourse by this social group, which has resulted in 'the most important socio-political problems, as well as the concerns of the largest share of the population

¹¹ Pirani (2010) 133.

¹² Ibid. 138.

¹³ Clement in Pirani (2010) 187.

¹⁴ See Judha (2013) 40-4.

[failing to be] properly articulated.’¹⁵ This has had the effect, in particular, of marginalising both young and old in Russia. In the 2000s, pensioners have formed the backbone of one of the strongest anti-Putinist civil movements, and they staged one of the first mass protests against the Putin administration in January 2005, when thousands of pensioners took to the streets in protest against cutbacks to social benefits.¹⁶

A further group who have been forgotten in Russia’s adoption of a neo-liberal marketisation is the generation that came of age in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This generation were the first to do so in Russia with no memory of life in the USSR, prompting a number of observers to mention the idea of a ‘lost-generation’ of Russian youth, particularly in the provinces where both crime and drug addiction have prevailed. This divide has been exacerbated by the fact that a specific generation of coetaneous politicians have acquired prominent positions of power throughout Putin’s government. This predominant circle of high-profile members of the Putin administration had their political outlook and worldview shaped by their formative experience of maturing during the Era of Stagnation under Leonid Brezhnev in the 1970s and early 1980s. Russian political scientists Vladimir Gelman, Dmitry Travin, and Otar Marganiya identify several key members of Putin’s team as belonging to this generation, including Dmitry Medvedev; Alexei Kudrin, Minister of Finance from 2000 to 2011; and Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov.¹⁷ This has resulted in a widening disparity between these two age groups, one who experienced the Soviet Union and therefore hold widely disparate ambitions for modern Russian politics and society compared to those who came of age in the 1990s and 2000s.

Opposition and dissent

This growing economic divide in Putin’s Russia has resulted in an augmenting discourse that challenges the established narrative that the 2000s has brought widespread economic prosperity. Prominent politician and trenchant opponent of the Putin regime, Alexi Navalny has charged the Kremlin with exasperating inequality and economic disparity by promoting a plutocracy through a culture of fiscal

¹⁵ Chebankova (2012) 66.

¹⁶ See Horvath (2013) 48-54.

¹⁷ Gelman, Travin and Marganiya (2014) 111.

corruption among a wealthy elite.¹⁸ In a series of investigations conducted by Navalny and his team of researchers, they claim that Russia's rich have amassed vast wealth while facilitating an unequal society.¹⁹ Furthermore, on his official website, Navalny argues that the new Russian elite have drained the country of its resources, stating that: 'it's time to choose: hospitals and roads, not the palaces of officials [...] it is unacceptable that in Russia in the 21st century millions of people still live without affordable medicine, without normal roads, without high-quality housing and communal services.'²⁰ Navalny makes clear that the solution for an enhancement in the quality of life, politicians need to pay more attention to the economic situation in Russia's provinces, stating that there is a need to 'develop not only in Moscow, but all of Russia'.²¹

Navalny's polemical criticisms of the Putin regime have been echoed by a small but prominent section of journalists and political commentators in Russia. For example, writing in 2000, Sergei Kovalev attributes Putin's neo-liberal economic programme to the influence of right wing political factions in the Duma, criticising the president for embracing this economic model as a means of accumulating political power.²² More pertinently, journalist and human right activist Anna Politkovskaia, whose work has already been discussed in the preceding chapter, frequently reported on the economic and regional disparity under Putinism. While working as an investigative journalist for the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* she travelled around Russia during the 2000s, courageously and meticulously exposing institutionalised corruption. Politkovskaia's writings eschew the prominent political discourse of Putinism that saturates the state controlled media, and instead privileges 'the dissenting voices, all those who might criticise and come up with alternative ideas.'²³ In her book, *Putin's Russia*, Politkovskaia observes that Putin's power is based on the support of oligarchs and billionaires, while 'millions of Russian pensioners who can

¹⁸ In December 2016 Navalny announced his intention to run in the 2018 presidential election, and *The Economist* subsequently labeled Navalny as the 'chief threat to Vladimir Putin' in the election. It has subsequently been announced, however, that Navalny is currently barred from running in the presidential election due to being sentenced to a suspended five year prison sentence after being convicted of embezzlement in February 2017. See the *Economist* (2017).

¹⁹ See Walker (2015).

One example is Navalny's exposé that former president Dmitry Medvedev had amassed a secret collection of palaces, yachts, and vineyard. For the full report see Navalny (2017).

²⁰ Navalny (2016).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Kovalev (2000).

²³ Politkovskaia (2007) 105.

barley make ends meet weren't given a thought.²⁴ Politkovskaia's journalism address the mobilisation of pensioners that I have noted above, attesting that they have formed a prominent part of the anti-Putin protests movement, acting as a legitimate and vociferous opposition to the government.²⁵ Interestingly, Politkovskaia echoes Navalny's political manifesto that Russia's provinces have been left behind by Putin's economic policies:

Putin decided to base his power solely on the oligarchs, the billionaires who own Russia's oil and gas reserves. Putin is friends with some oligarchs and at war with others, and this is called statecraft. There is no place for the people in this scheme of things. Moscow is life-giving warmth and light, while the provinces are its pale reflection, and those who inhabit them might as well be living on the moon.²⁶

In other words, Politkovskaia highlights how for the urban and Moscow centric population, Russia's provinces are viewed as foreign and uncivilised compared to the country's developed western cities.

In this opening section, I have considered the consequences of Putin's adoption of a neo-liberal market economy that privileged the west of the country and its large, modern cities. In particular, I have highlighted the observations made by scholars that connect Putinism's economic policies with a divarication in society. These economic, generational, and regional divides in contemporary Russia have acquired significance in the political discourse of vocal opponents of the Putin regime. For the remainder of the chapter, I will consider how the theatre of New Drama writer Vassily Sigarev addresses these prominent anxieties. I argue that although the two plays considered here take divergent stylistic forms, Sigarev's staging of provincial society specifically draws upon Russian contexts and history to interrogate this key facet of Putin's presidency.

²⁴ Politkovskaia (2004) 197.

²⁵ Ibid. 216ff.

²⁶ Ibid. 197.

Vassily Sigarev

Sigarev was born in 1977 in the Sverdlovsk region of Russia in the Urals. After dropping out of the State Pedagogical University in Nizhny Tagil, he enrolled at the Yekaterinburg State Theatre Institute's playwriting course, run by preeminent Russian playwright Nikolai Koliada. It was under the tutorage of Koliada that Sigarev would go on to write many of his formative and most significant plays. *Plasticine*, written when he was only 23 and still a student at Koliada's school, is arguably the antecedent play of New Drama that focuses on contemporary provincial life in Putin's Russia. First performed as a rehearsed reading at the Liubimovka New Writing Festival in 2000, the play won the respected Russian literary award the Anti-Booker Prize in the same year. As has been discussed in Chapter One, the Anti-Booker was an annual award staged by the daily broadsheet newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* between 1995 and 2001 as contra to the British-sponsored Russian Booker Prize. Vocal critic of Putin, oligarch Boris Berezovsky, whose media-empire had adopted a strongly polemical stance toward the Putin government by 2000 owned *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, and Sigarev's victory in the Anti-Booker was therefore recognition of both his counterculture credentials, but also aligned his work to one of Russia's most anti-Putin media outlets.²⁷ *Plasticine*'s initial successes were significant in marking Sigarev's entry into the canon of New Drama writers. The play's triumph in the stage play category of the Anti-Booker was critical in providing Sigarev with instant credibility. The preceding recipients of the award - Maksim Kurochkin in 1998 and Evgeni Grishkovets in 1999 – already had full-scale productions commissioned in Moscow, and had both been staged at the Royal Court Theatre's International Season in 1999 under the collective title *Moscow – Open City* (1999).²⁸ *Plasticine*'s performance at Liubimovka, the annual congregation of playwrights and directors organised by Elena Gremina and Alexei Kazantsev, was an additional acknowledgment of Sigarev's ascendancy to the echelons of the cumulative new writing movement in Russia, and served to promote his work outside of Yekaterinburg for the first time.

In June 2001 *Plasticine* premiered in Moscow, when the innovative new writing theatre the Playwright and Director Centre (CDR) staged it in a seminal production that launched the careers of Sigarev and director Kirill Serebrennikov.

²⁷ For more information see Judha (2013) 42-46

²⁸ Grishkovets also performed his one-man play *How I Ate a Dog* at the Royal Court in 2000.

Serebrennikov attests that six different directors had rejected the offer to direct *Plasticine* before he decided to take a risk on staging the production in Moscow.²⁹ At this point, it is worthwhile taking a moment to discuss the importance of Serebrennikov's role in the development of New Drama and Russian theatre in general as a legitimate oppositional and interventionist movement against the Putin regime. Russian theatre critic Pavel Rudnev observes that 'it is commonly held that political theater began in post soviet Russia with Kirill Serebrennikov.'³⁰ Rudnev highlights Serebrennikov's production of nineteenth century Russian playwright Alexander Ostrovsky *The Forest (Les, 1871)* at the Moscow Art Theatre that premiered on 23 December 2004 and continues to run in the theatre's repertoire.³¹ The apogee of Serebrennikov's production occurred when the two actors playing the lead roles of Gurmyzhskaya and Bulanov appeared on stage dressed as Putin and eminent Russian pop star and celebrity Alla Pugacheva, who has publically supported both Putin and the United Russia party. Furthermore, Serebrennikov explicitly foregrounds that theatre practitioners are natural opponents of the government who can critique the negative cultural policies of the Kremlin. Discussing the Kremlin-sanctioned protests against the Bolshoi's contemporary production of Tchaikovsky's *Yevgeny Onegin* (1879) in September 2006, and the closure of the controversial art exhibition *Forbidden Art* (2006) in the same year, Serebrennikov states:

I think its awful that an artist is taken to court for raising question about religion. It's ridiculous when the Parliament storms the Bolshoi and starts teaching them how to write operas. It resembles Soviet times very much, but at the same time it allows us to answer; it provokes a struggle.³²

After making a name for himself as one of the vanguard directors of New Drama, Serebrennikov took the post of artistic director of the Gogol Centre in Moscow in 2012. Updating the theatre's repertoire he has produced a series of new writing pieces, as well as contemporary modern dress productions of classic plays. In 2017, Serebrennikov has become the direct target of the Kremlin's campaign of artistic

²⁹ Serebrennikov (2009) 11.

³⁰ Rudnev (2014).

³¹ I saw Serebrennikov's production of *The Forest* at the Moscow Art Theatre during a research trip to Moscow on 30 May 2015.

³² Serebrennikov (2006) 149.

ensorship and repression. In May 2017 the Gogol Centre was raided by riot police, in an act that was described by Elena Kovalskaya as ‘an act of intimidation to all who work in the Russian theater.’³³ On 22 August 2017 Serebrennikov was arrested on charges of embezzlement and fraud. As of writing he is currently under house arrest and awaiting trial.³⁴

That a trenchant, topical play by a young, unknown Russian playwright could be staged at a central Moscow theatre, undoubtedly caused a polarised frisson amongst Russian audiences, which is evidenced by the number of amateur reviews posted on *LiveJournal* blogs in the first year of the production. A British première as part of the Royal Court’s International Playwrights Season followed, and in March 2002 *Plasticine* was staged as a full production at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, directed by Dominic Cooke. Critics, who compared *Plasticine* with the British ‘In-Yer-Face’ theatre of Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane, responded positively to the production and Sigarev became the first foreign recipient of the *Evening Standard*’s Charles Wintour Award for most promising playwright. It has subsequently been observed that Sigarev’s play was a defining moment in the early development of New Drama: John Freedman describes *Plasticine* as the ‘play that kicked off the term “new drama” in earnest’ and, echoing this, Kristina Matvienko defines Sigarev’s play as the ‘flagship’ of New Drama.³⁵ ‘Sigarev’, writes Yana Ross, ‘has inspired playwrights across the country with his haunting snapshots of teenagers, drugs addicts, and marginal characters who live behind the “barbed wire” of socially accepted terms.’³⁶ The production was the first piece of New Drama to gain attention from the mainstream press in Russia, and also the first to be staged in a full production abroad. *Plasticine*’s immediate critical acclaim and commercial success in Russia and overseas meant the play became a criterion for the standards and expectations of playwriting in Russia, and established a set of clichés that many Russian critics and journalists would draw upon when discussing New Drama in the early 2000s. For example, editor of leading Russian culture journal *Iskusstvo Kino* Daniil Dondurei states that “New Drama” is associated only with the features of the social typology of characters: provincials, prisoners [...] down and outs’.³⁷ Similarly, theatre critic Alena

³³ Kovalskaya (2017).

³⁴ For more information see Freedman (2017).

³⁵ Freedman (2011) and Matvienko (2008).

³⁶ Ross (2006) 29-30.

³⁷ Boyakov, Davydova and Dondurei (2004) .

Karas sees the appeal of New Drama arising from its portrayal of ‘street language, brothels, the homeless, [and] homosexuality’.³⁸

Serebrennikov’s production of *Plasticine* was performed in the repertoire of the CDR from 2001 until 2007. As I have observed above, during the period the production played at the CDR the growing social disparity in Russia was regularly debated and reported by the Russian media, and notably, the show’s run closely coincided with Putin’s first two terms as president between 2000-2008. Despite the initial mercurial publicity gained by Sigarev after the play’s opening runs in Moscow and London, the enduring appeal of the CDR’s staging of *Plasticine* suggests that the production continued to speak to specific concerns and discourses articulated in Putin’s Russia well into the late 2000s and Putin’s second term in office.

Before analysing *Plasticine* and *Black Milk* in closer detail, it is useful to draw attention to an important debate surrounding Sigarev’s perceived exploitation of Russian poverty and the portrayal of ‘down and outs’. Sigarev is clear that he intends his theatre to focus on the indiscriminate violence and social deprivation inherent in the provincial life that he experienced during his own youth in the Urals: ‘I played a lot of things down, made everything softer’, he explains, ‘it was much worse in reality. I don’t think what I wrote was so hard and cruel’.³⁹ Despite this Sigarev has faced accusations of cultural tourism from both peers and theatre critics. Translator of Sigarev’s play into English, Sasha Dugdale, recalls how one commentator observed that: ‘his parents’ flat is fine. They have a fine life. I don’t know what he’s talking about’.⁴⁰ At the same time critics also assailed Sigarev for allegedly courting wider audiences abroad at the expense of Russia’s international image. Dugdale explains:

Sigarev’s popularity in the United Kingdom has had [...] an effect on how he is viewed in Russia. There is some hostility to his work. I interpret this partly as a degree of jealousy and the usual dismissal of the widely popular. I have also heard Sigarev’s love of ‘lower forms of life’ and his ‘pointlessly obscene texts’ criticized, and there even seems to be a sense in which he ‘washes Russia’s dirty linen in public’ for Europe’s gratification.⁴¹

³⁸ Karas (2004)

³⁹ Sigarev in O’Mahoney (2003)

⁴⁰ Dugdale in Aston and O’Thomas (2015) 80.

⁴¹ Dugdale (2009) 22.

The implication of these claims is that Sigarev's forays into Russian impoverishment are detached and cynical attempts to exploit a lucrative and commercial market in western Europe by playing on recognisable stereotypes of post-Soviet squalor and corruption. This can be countered, however, with the fact that Sigarev wrote *Plasticine* while still a student in Yekaterinburg, and had no exposure to the ethos of the Royal Court, or even current trends in the Moscow theatre scene.⁴² This is an observation that has recently been emphasized by theatre scholars Elaine Aston and Mark O'Thomas, who argue that:

Considering Sigarev comes not from the 'theatre city' of Moscow but from the industrial wastelands of the central Urals and trained with Nikolai Kolyada at the Yekaterinburg Theatre Insitute, the question of a British in-yer-face influence is somewhat spurious. From Sigarev's point of view it is the bleak, urban reality of the Urals that informs the 'raw emotion' of his plays.⁴³

Allied to this has been Sigarev's eschewal of New Drama after his initial success in the early 2000s, and in particular a rejection of the linguistic aesthetics he himself developed: '[*mat*] has become fashionable, and I am reluctant to follow trends'.⁴⁴

Sigarev's two plays *Plasticine* and *Black Milk* are therefore, a paramount starting point for a discussion of how New Drama approached this widening gap in inequality between the west of Russia, and its provincial cities to the east. Despite the two plays taking disparate approaches to their interrogation of the widening social divides under Putinism, they are both important case studies for examining New Drama's urgent engagement with this facet of contemporary political discourse.

Plasticine

A young man enters the stage of the CDR alone. The performance space is empty except for an old and battered upright piano that faces away from the audience, exposing its inner mechanisms. The young man slowly circles the piano before crouching down in front of it. Facing the audience, he huddles into a small ball by

⁴² Raikin (2002). Furthermore, Sigarev did not attend any of the Royal Court's initial workshops in Russian in 1999 and 2000, and was only staged in the UK after Elena Gremina presented a finished script of *Plasticine* to Elyse Dodgson after the play's performance at the Liubimovka Festival.

⁴³ Aston and O'Thomas (2015) 138.

⁴⁴ Sigarev (2009)

pulling his knees up to his chest. He tightly holds a lump of grey plasticine, which he rubs urgently between his hands and breathes on to warm the malleable putty. As the plasticine softens he molds it into a series of bizarre and abstract forms that slowly transform before the audience's eyes to take on the appearance of human shape that is roughly the size of a small doll. The young man remains silent, but through his sculpting he communicates a nervous tension to the audience, before placing the plasticine figure upstage on the floor directly in their eye line as he puts the finishing touches to his work.

This is the opening scene from Serebrennikov's original production of *Plasticine* at the CDR. It introduces the protagonist of the play, Maksim, a teenager growing up in a communal apartment block with his infirm grandmother – his parents are never mentioned and it is implied that he is orphaned – in a decaying town in the region of Sverdlovsk. Sequestered in his bedroom Maksim moulds hardened objects made of plasticine in an attempt to articulate and retaliate for the series of violent and sexual degradations he is subjected to as he traverses his provincial town with his solitary schoolmate Lyokha. In Sigarev's examination of the marginalised communities in Russia's provinces, the urban landscape of *Plasticine* is unmistakably post-Soviet. This is a world where people are opening up to the possibilities of Western consumerism and arts, previously taboo in the Soviet era. Maksim's age, fourteen, is important. He represents the first generation of children to come of age in Russia who have no experience of life under the Soviet regime. Instead, his moral and social grounding is a product of the turbulence of Russia's development of a free market, capitalist economy, and the veneer of Russian democracy cultivated under the presidency of Yeltsin and bolstered under Putinism. Maksim inhabits the violent and hyper-sexualised world of provincial Russia, moribund after the corrosion of Russia's industrial sector. *Plasticine* is a nightmarish vision of turn of the millennium Russia, seen through the vision of a generation in flux, neither products of the Soviet system nor able to coalesce with the world of 'New Russia' to the west.

In a series of thirty-three short linear scenes, Maksim is subjected to a series of physical and psychological degradations as he is tormented by the ghostly apparition of his friend Spira, who commits suicide at the beginning of the play. In an interview given in 2002, Sigarev describes the play as a 'story made up of different stories. A chain of events that occurred with different people – something with me, and

something with my brother and friends.’⁴⁵ The fragmented structure of the play foregrounds the stunted parlance of the characters and the fractured moral code they exist by in the world of *Plasticine*. Throughout the production Maksim repeatedly experiences physical violence in a series of brutal scenes that similarly occur after he is either offered or attempts to initiate sex. Firstly, he is attacked by a young bridegroom celebrating his wedding who accuses Maksim of flirting with his new wife, then aggressively assaulted by a drunken prostitute after Maksim rejects her advances, and finally being savagely beaten by his class mates after Lyokha reveals to them that they have had sex in a cinema during a screening of Tinto Brass’s 1979 film *Caligula*. In an attempt to reconcile with Maksim after his betrayal, Lyokha invites him to a derelict block of flats on the pretence of having sex with two young women. Once inside, however, the two boys realise that they have been deceived and are subsequently violently raped by two elder male convicts. A turning point occurs when Maksim’s grandmother dies, and he models a knuckleduster out of plasticine in order to revenge his rapists. Returning to the convicts’ apartment Maksim is over powered by the men who, it is implied, throw Maksim to his death from the window of their building.

Russian critics reviewing the CDR’s productions highlight Sigarev’s stylistic employment of realistic ‘street language’ used by modern Russian youth, and the frequent and affective use of violent sexualised language [*mat*].⁴⁶ Mirroring Sigarev and Serebrennikov’s relative youth and lack of professional experience was a young cast who were previously unknown by the majority of the audience at the CDR. In a recent interview, Serebrennikov reflects that the casting of young and unfamiliar actors for his production of *Plasticine* was a deliberate provocation and reaction to the Moscow theatres that continued to employ the same elderly actors in their repertoires.⁴⁷ The lack of star names helped give the production, as one critic phrased it, an aura of ‘authenticity’.⁴⁸ This dialectic and visual ‘authenticity’ was reinforced by the production’s use of contemporary fashion, including hoodies, baggy t-shirts, jeans, and Converse All Star boots worn by Maksim and Lyokha, which underscores that they are part of a nascent generation, emerging from the drab bureaucracy of the

⁴⁵ Sigarev in Raikina (2002).

⁴⁶ Basenina (2001).

⁴⁷ ‘At that time [the cast] were either unknown or unemployed [...] They were not taken anywhere! All the troupes were rammed by some elderly artists.’ Serebrennikov (2017).

⁴⁸ Basenina (2001)

late Soviet Union. Maksim and Lyokha's clothes contrast with the stark neutrality and black and white tones of the production's set at the CDR, designed by Nikolai Simonov. A number of aesthetic elements of the staging invokes a mental hospital or asylum, with meticulous clean white tiles on the walls of the space, bright white strip lighting, and the positioning of a wheelchair in the corner of the performance space. The sanitised and sterile environment of the set recalls a trope in Putin's public polemics early in his presidency where he described the Russian state as infirmed, such as in his first State of the Nation address on 8 July 2000, when he employed a medical analogy describing the Russia nation as 'senile'.⁴⁹

In Serebrennikov's protean production, cast members play multiple roles across age differences and gender. For example, actor Vitalii Khaev played Maksim's sadistic teacher, the convict who rapes him, and the kindly old woman who looks after him at the market. Theatre scholars Tom Sellar and A. M. Pavlov both argue that this staging device is not utilised to 'explore the usual set of drag ironies found in postmodern theatre', but instead serves to explicitly remind the audience that as an orphaned teenager, Maksim inhabits an adult world where the rules and hierarchies are dictated by nebulous individuals whose values are divergent from his own.⁵⁰ Along with his peer Lyokha, Maksim must instead inhabit the adult spaces in *Plasticine* as an outsider or 'other' that does not belong in them.

Private and Public in *Plasticine*

As Maksim places the plasticine model on the floor in front of the audience, the stage comes to life as a chorus of indistinguishable figures appear, shrouded in identical black cloaks. In *Plasticine*, scenes melt into one another, and Serebrennikov's highly stylised, choreographed direction, gave the play an almost dreamlike quality. The small and circumscribed space of the CDR was rendered by Simonov's set design to elicit the cramped and claustrophobic atmosphere of a communal *Khrushchyovka* - antiquated five-story Soviet apartment buildings built during the premiership of Nikita Khrushchev, which had become notorious for their dilapidation by the 2000s - that the characters reside in. Expanding on this aesthetic element of the production, Sellar observes that Serebrennikov's use of space in the CDR's production 'crowds

⁴⁹ BBC (2000). For a full transcript of the speech see <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21480> [Accessed 11 November 2015].

⁵⁰ Sellar (2004) 70 and Pavlov (2011) 105.

intimate scenes onto small patches of ground while other activity continues elsewhere - a staging reminiscent of the Soviet-style communal apartments.⁵¹ The delineation between the public and private space is a key element of Maksim's provincial town in *Plasticine*, both through Serebrennikov's staging of the production at the CDR, and through repeated reference to space in Sigarev's text and stage directions.

In the second short scene, Maksim witnesses the coffin of his recently deceased friend Spira being carried out of his 'shabby five-story block of flats' by a crane as the communal hallways are too tight for the coffin to be carried out.⁵² One of the local children who lives in Maksim's apartment describes the predicament faced by the residents:

The hallway is too narrow for the coffin. It won't fit through. My nan had a flat like that. They unloaded her though, and just carried her out. She was fat, so they had a right load of trouble.⁵³

Spira's red coffin is winched high above the stage by a *mechane*, as his elderly relatives mourn his death. Sigarev, however, emphasises that in the communal world of the provincial *Khrushchyovka* apartments, acts of life and death can be quickly forgotten. As the coffin is removed from the jib of the crane, the action around Maksim again rapidly transforms, a young boy and girl flirt and kiss while Spira's family quarrel over his meagre possessions. As the production unfolds, the previously bare space becomes progressively cluttered with scenery, props, and clothing that the performers discard on the stage, such that the performance space is constantly reduced and redefined. The claustrophobic evocation of space in these scenes is again echoed in one of Sigarev's later stage directions:

*The walls begin to pulse and the room presses in on [Maksim]. Everything is alive and moving. Everything is moving a pulsing and laughing at him. The room gets smaller and smaller. Now it is no longer a room, but a little box, the walls covered in black material. It is no longer a room, it is a coffin.*⁵⁴

⁵¹ Sellar (2004) 70.

⁵² Sigarev (2002) 3.

⁵³ *Ibid* 5.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*. 29.

Here, the *Khrushchyovka* becomes a literal coffin for Maksim, who feels unable to escape the existence he is trapped in.

In *Plasticine*, the *Khrushchyovka*, or communal apartment, becomes a microcosm of provincial life, an area where the delineation between the public and private becomes obfuscated. Young couples steal kisses in corridors as everyday life continues around them; Lyokha boasts of having sex with girl on the stairwell of his apartment block; Maksim is violently harassed by his passive-aggressive neighbour, and, as the stage direction and Spira's suicide foretell, it is where he will eventually face tragic death. It is only in the privacy of his bedroom that Maksim is able to express himself, silently constructing his plasticine models. For the young teenagers in *Plasticine*, however, there is no hope for a better life or a 'New Russia'. Sigarev 'never promises a "new life"', write Beumers and Lipovetsky, 'on the contrary, [*Plasticine*] persistently and purposefully destroys and devastates everything alive'.⁵⁵ Maksim's murder at the end of the play is the moment when Sigarev reveals to his audience the final and inescapable injustice faced by Russia's provincial youth.

The significance of space in the production echoes the complex re-framing of public and private space that occurred in Russia after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In the 1990s there was a redefining of public space as socialist monuments were pulled down and street names, buildings, and even cities were renamed.⁵⁶ More pertinent here, is how traditional areas of public space under fell under private ownership after the collapse of communism across the Soviet Union. Although public space under the Soviet regime was strictly controlled and monitored by the state and was not permissible for citizens to use independently or to subvert normative state doctrines, the reassignment of public areas in post-Communist Russia was a prominent anxiety in the 1990s and beyond into the Putin government.⁵⁷ As I have noted above, Chebankova argues that Putinism heralded a further era of transition to a market economy and a new wave of unbridled neo-liberalism in Russia. In their co-edited book *The Politics of Public Space*, anthropologists Setha Low and Neil Smith argue that forceful regulation of public space is a central desideratum of neoliberal

⁵⁵ Beumers and Lipovetsky (2009) 156

⁵⁶ For example, the city of Yekaterinburg where Sigarev wrote *Plasticine* was named Sverdlovsk between 1924 and 1991. See Gill (2013) 181-3.

⁵⁷ For a more in depth discussion of the history of public space in the Soviet Union see Engel (2007) and Zhelnina (2013), who both trace the development of the concept of public space in Russia in the twentieth century into the Putin era.

restructuring.⁵⁸ Furthermore, it has also been noted that ‘as cities have redeveloped, public space has become a key battleground – a battleground over the homeless and the poor and over the rights of developers, corporations, and those who seek to make over the city in an image attractive to tourists, middle and upper-class residents, and suburbanites.’⁵⁹ In other words, the collapse of communism and the emergence of neoliberal policies under Putinism heralded a redefinition of social-spatial dynamics, whereby public space was aggressively co-opted and restructured, resulting in the exclusion of marginalised members of society. Contextualising these theoretical ideas, social scientists Jolanta Aidukaite and Christian Fröhlich identify that in cities in the former Soviet Union, the politics of public space has taken a prominent place. Russia has been ‘subject to ongoing neoliberal urban redevelopment’, write Aidukaite and Fröhlich.⁶⁰ ‘Housing privatisation and marketisation, as well as the withdrawal of the state from housing and urban policy since the 1990s, have provoked the mobilisation of citizens concerned about housing and local public space.’⁶¹ In Putin’s Russia, both public and private space has been coerced by a plutocratic neo-liberal economic regime, and has fallen into the hands of the wealthy.

In *Plasticine*, Sigarev further addresses the contentious political reassignment of public and private space in post-Soviet Russia in a series of scenes where Maksim and Lyokha illicitly smoke in the male toilets at their school. As the two teenagers silently pass a single cigarette between them and waft away the smoke to avoid detection, their female Russian-language teacher Ludmila Ivanovna enters the space catching them in the act. The redefining of space and who controls it is interrogated through the invasion of a room considered by Maksim and Lyokha to be sacrosanct from adults and teachers. As Maksim tells Ludmila: ‘You’ve got no right to come into the men’s toilets’⁶² Despite this, female teacher Ivanovna repeatedly invades the space designed for male students until Maksim retaliates by molding a large plasticine phallus that he flashes at a terrified Ludmila when she again confronts them in the toilets. The production calls up the politicisation of spatial reconstruction in the

⁵⁸ ‘The neoliberal regime that has taken hold of political and cultural power around the world involves the sharpening of social divisions, based especially on class, race/ethnic, national, and gender differences, but stretching much further into the fabric of social difference. The control of public space is a central strategy of that neoliberalism.’ Low and Smith (2006) 15.

⁵⁹ Mitchell and Staeheli (2006) 144.

⁶⁰ Aidukaite and Fröhlich (2015) 572.

⁶¹ Ibid. 566.

⁶² Sigarev (2002) 8.

1990s and 2000s, including how younger and economically disadvantaged sections of society have been subordinated during the re-defining of public and private space in Putin's Russia. Ludmila's physical interrogation of Maksim, where she aggressively invades his personal space, resonates with Konstantin Axenov, Isolde Brade and Evgenij Bondarchuk's observations that 'political and institutional changes, the disintegration of established social structures and the introduction of market mechanisms have been concomitant with fundamentally new process of spatial differentiation' in modern Russia.⁶³

Articulating the Unspeakable: Language and communication

Sigarev interrogates Russia's burgeoning economic inequality by offering important insights into contemporary social and political issues encountered by marginalised young people living in the provinces. In addition to calling into question the redefinition of space in Putin's Russia, the exclusion of the poor from the normative discourse of the regime is another issue that is foregrounded by Sigarev. Maksim's silent sculpting of plasticine in the play's opening scene, a visual motif repeated at later intervals throughout *Plasticine*, underscores his inability to fully communicate or express his anger and despair at the perpetual injustices he endures. In his stage directions Sigarev makes clear that Maksim's mercurial plasticine models manifest deep emotions that he is unable vocally to express:

*The remains of the plasticine hiss, catching light, and flare up. Smoke rises to the ceiling and goes in his eyes. The tears well up. He turns away, but the tears continue to roll down his nose and then down to the corners of his mouth. Now he is actually crying. He is sobbing. Crying as if he knew something.*⁶⁴

The production directly draws the audience's attention to a concern that the poor and the young cannot vocally express themselves. The dialogue is terse and often reduced to monosyllabic exchanges between the characters. In an interview given in 2001, Serebrennikov explains that in his production at the CDR he stripped back the plot to

⁶³ Axenov, Brade and Bondarchuk (2009) xiii.

⁶⁴ Sigarev (2002) 3.

focus on the characters' lack of verbal expression.⁶⁵ As Serebrennikov himself states, much of Sigarev's theatrical language revolves around words and utterances such as 'fuck', 'yeah' 'uh-huh' and 'suck'.⁶⁶ Key scenes in the play are often performed in complete silence, or stylistically mimed to music. The upright piano that remains on stage becomes a central focus of the production. Throughout the performance the prop supersedes dialogue as the primary dramatic expression of *agon* between Sigarev's protagonists, as the actors use the instrument to fill verbal gaps in the text and substitute for vocal expression, imparting the characters' desire to vocalise their emotions and be heard. Explicitly, when Maksim's neighbour confronts him in the hallways of their communal apartment, mistakenly accusing him of setting fire to his letterbox, he unstraps his belt and savagely gags Maksim with it. This act renders Maksim verbally unable to defend himself against his neighbour's accusations, and reduced to uttering unintelligible grunts and wavering cries through the leather belt.

The inability to communicate verbally also determines Maksim's attempt to form meaningful relationships with his peers. After being caught smoking by Ludmila, Maksim and Lyohka's adolescent prurience leads them to break in through the exit door of their local cinema to watch *Caligula*, which had previously been branded as pornographic by the Soviet state.⁶⁷ As Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev's score *Dance of the Knights*, the soundtrack to the movie, is blasted over the speakers at the cinema, Maksim and Lyohka sit in silent enthrallment watching the movie. In Serebrennikov's production the two actors sit downstage, making direct eye contact with the audience. As the film's score reaches an apogee Maksim and Lyohka's hands slowly drift towards each other and in the darkened cinema they mutually masturbate each other. Serebrennikov stages the scene as a comic pastiche of masturbation, where the two actors vigorously shake bottles of fizzy drink until they explode over themselves and the audience seated in the front rows of the theatre. The scene's slapstick, stylised performance acts as comic relief in the production, but is nonetheless a challenging piece of staging in a country that had only legalised homosexuality in 1993. Maksim and Lyohka's are not able to express their sexual desire for each other outside of physical action. Despite attempting to create intimate relationships throughout the play, Maksim ultimately fails to do so. For Maksim, the

⁶⁵ Serebrennikov (2001).

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Indeed, in some instances Soviet citizens were imprisoned for possessing illegal copies of the film.

plasticine models he creates are a surrogate for his stunted parlance and frustrations at the injustices he experiences at the hands of the powerful adults. In this way, Sigarev examines how the young in provincial Russia have been excluded from the public sphere and silenced from participating in the normative discourse.

So far we have observed how *Plasticine* addresses explicit anxieties in contemporary Russia, including the Putin regime's co-option of space and the silencing of Maksim's generation from contributing their own social and political discourse. In the following analysis of Sigarev's play, I will examine the established hierarchies and class divide encountered by Maksim and how *Plasticine* makes use of and reimagines traditional imagery from Russian history and culture, framing the play in an explicitly Russia context.

Staging Divides

Russian theatre scholar Yulia Girba has observed a further staging device used in Serebrennikov's production of *Plasticine* at the CDR, namely a chorus of old female pensioners, 'among them actors who pronounce the text with rough smoky voices [...] a genuine Greek choir which comments and moves the poetic and metaphorical plot'.⁶⁸ The production presents this 'chorus' of pensioners as a silent but constant presence during the performance. Scene twenty-six, when Maksim is sent by his grandmother to purchase discounted meat at the shopping centre given out during the local elections, arguably demonstrates Sigarev's most interesting use of his chorus. As I have discussed above, one of the results of Putin's early economic policies was the drop in living standards of pensioners, and in many way this scene is paramount to the understanding of the play. Sigarev's bleak portrayal of provincial city life at the turn of the millennium has led Buemers and Lipovetsky to assert that *Plasticine* evokes the spirit of preminent Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's description of carnival humour and the grotesque in his book *Rabelais and his World*:

[*Plasticine*] captures the moment when the carnival disorder – in many respects characteristic for the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet system with its symbolical and social order – turns into the norm of existence,

⁶⁸ Girba in Buemers and Lipovetsky (2009) 159.

when liminality becomes permanent, when all mechanisms of the social protection of identity disappear completely.⁶⁹

An established principle of Bakhtin's carnival, however, is that it marks the 'suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.'⁷⁰ What is significant about scene twenty-six is that it diverges from the carnivalesque insofar as the entrenched hierarchical system of the early years of Putinism are fully formed and intact. Sigarev demonstrates a preoccupation with the paradoxes and contradictions of twenty-first century Russia, where nascent consumerism, wealth, and privilege is negated by extreme poverty and a loss of social support structures for the marginalised.

On one side of the stage the aggregation of pensioners stand rhythmically snapping their plastic shopping bags as they slowly advance in the queue. Not only does this raise the spectre of iconic images of protracted queues for basic products during the late Soviet Union, but it also attests to the erosion of welfare, and the growing poverty and hardship in Russia's provinces.⁷¹ For these pensioners the benefits of new Russia have evaded them. Juxtaposed to the chorus on the other side of the stage, is Maksim's romantic interest Tanya – also referred to as 'She' in Sigarev's playtext. In contrast to the black robes worn by the pensioners, Tanya is dressed fully in red, and unlike their restrained repetitive movements she moves freely around the stage. This staging recalls the analysis in the opening section of the chapter that the Putin administration's pursuit of neo-liberal economics has sacrificed a stratum of Russian society for the prosperity of a small section of the population.⁷² As Lilia Shevtsova identifies, 'the gap between the haves and have-nots was growing, and the average incomes of the 10 percent richest exceeded those of the 10 percent poorest by a multiple of 15.2 in June 2004.'⁷³ Moreover, the dialogue between Tanya and her mother, where she demands that she purchase her a pair of expensive high-heeled sandals, invites the audience to consider the growth of consumerism and the gap between those who can afford to indulge in it and those who can't:

⁶⁹ Beumers and Lipovetsky 157.

⁷⁰ Bakhtin (1984) 10.

⁷¹ See Bogdanov (2012) 77. 'The queue was a constant and immediately recognisable attribute of Soviet everyday life.'

⁷² Clement in Pirani (2010) 187.

⁷³ Shevtsova (2004) 332.

SHE: Look at these beauties

MOTHER: I can see them. (*She turns to leave*)

SHE: Buy them, Mum

MOTHER: Haven't you got enough sandals?

SHE: Not like these

MOTHER: You've got others

[...]

SHE: Stupid cow! You'd have bought them for Galka but you don't want to buy them for me. Stupid cow! I hate you! I'm going to live with Dad! And you can go and live with your Galka! Two stupid cows together!⁷⁴

Tanya, as a manifestation of the new middle classes is oblivious to those who are materially far poorer than her, and her manipulation of her mother results in the disdain of the shopping centre's clientele. What is important about this scene is it demonstrates Sigarev distancing himself from the Bakhtinian reading employed by Beumers and Lipovetsky. For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque symbolises a 'temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday rank.'⁷⁵ In other words, Bakhtin's Carnival offers a suspension of the status quo and class privileges, providing specific sections of medieval society a platform to vocalise their own marginalised discourses, and the opportunity for them to travesty the ruling elite. Although *Plasticine* does highlight and give voice to disempowered social groups, I contend the production rigorously entrenches the new class divisions that were emerging in post-Soviet Russia, underscoring normative class divisions represented in the dissonance between Tanya and Maksim.

Throughout *Plasticine*, Sigarev articulates the divarication between what Shevtsova terms the 'haves and have-nots' under Putinism and explores this in his examination of the divergent consequences faced by Maksim and Lyokha after their confrontation with Ludmila in the school toilets. Maksim is expelled after his grandmother, who is unsuspecting of his behaviour, is unable to defend him in front of the school's headmaster. In contrast, Lyokha's mother uses her power and connections as the owner of a local swimming pool to bribe Ludmila into overlooking

⁷⁴ Sigarev (2002) 45.

⁷⁵ Bakhtin (1984) 10.

Lyokha's involvement. Sigarev's depiction of the divergent fates of Maksim and Lyokha reinforces the class stratification of modern Russia, and echoes the discourses of a number of Russian commentators who foreground the political consequences of Putin's economic policies on the provinces. *Plasticine* presents a clear engagement and problematisation of the socio-political context of Putin's early years in power, which saw the appearance of a middle class and a growing divide between them and the newly created Russian 'underclass', represented by both Maksim and the chorus of pensioners.

The chorus of pensioners is not the only time the production evokes traditional imagery from the Russian and the Soviet past, incorporating it into the contemporary world depicted in *Plasticine*. In his important study *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre*, Freddie Rokem identifies the potential of theatre and performance to confront ongoing debates and cultural identity surrounding the past. 'Collective identities, whether they are cultural/ethnic, national, or even transnational, grow from a sense of the past', writes Rokem.⁷⁶ 'The theatre very forcefully participates in the ongoing representations and debates about these pasts, sometimes contesting the hegemonic understanding of the historical heritage on the basis on which these identities have been constructed, sometimes reinforcing them.'⁷⁷ Theatre scholar Molly Flynn has further identified that Russian playwrights in the twenty-first century have staged history to interrogate anxieties in contemporary society.⁷⁸ In *Plasticine*, Sigarev does not reinterpret specific historical moments, but rather deliberately plays with imagery from Russia's historical past to confront and make sense of contemporary social and political realities.

In the Russian tradition that dates back to the Tsardom of Russia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries - prior to Peter the Great's policy of westernisation of the Russian Empire in the early 1700s - red costumes were worn by women in rural communities during wedding ceremonies, associating red outfits with signs of fertility and female sexual maturity in pastoral settings. In Serebrennikov's performance, Viktoriia Tolstoganova who played Tanya, is dressed exclusively in red, wearing a red beret, overcoat and tights. As the unobtainable representation of Maksim's desire,

⁷⁶ Rokem (2000) 3.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Flynn (2015) 70-81. For example, Flynn argues that Alexandra Polivanova and Mikhail Kaluzhsky's play *Grandchildren: The Second Act (Vtoroi akt. Vnuki, 2012)* stages narratives from the Stalin era to reflect on the modern lives of both the artists and audiences.

Tanya's outfit is a visual signifier of his inability to transition into adulthood. Throughout *Plasticine*, sex, or the promise of sex, is never comprehensively fulfilled for Maksim and is always followed by violent acts of aggression towards him. As has been discussed earlier, Maksim's sexual encounter with Lyokha results in him being attacked by a gang of his peers after Lyokha betrays him. In scene eighteen, Maksim is again humiliated when after a brief sexual encounter with a prostitute he vomits on her and is rejected. Similarly, when Maksim passes a drunken wedding party and is seduced by the bride, despite rejecting her advances, he is savagely beaten by the groom. Finally, the pair's rape is ultimately the result of Lyokha being tricked by the sadistic adolescent Natasha, who leads them to a block of uninhabited barracks with the promise of sex. Again in this scene coloured garments are used to evoke the liminality between childhood and maturity. As Maksim and Lyokha prepare to go out and meet Natasha, they change out of their dark casual clothes and dress in all white suits. The colour of their dress is significant and evokes traditional Russian codification of white clothes as an external signifier of transiting social roles, often from child to adult. Maksim and Lyokha anticipate that by having sex with Natasha they will achieve maturity and transition into adulthood. In *Plasticine* sex, and the loss of one's virginity becomes an important transition into adulthood. In the dialogue between Lyokha and his rapist this is made particularly apparent:

CADET: You still a virgin then?

LYOKHA: What?

CADET: Still a little boy?⁷⁹

Maksim's failures and repeated humiliations, coupled with the Cadet's assertion, suggest to Sigarev's audience that Maksim's generation are stunted in their ability to develop into adulthood. They are part of a generation that has been forgotten and left behind, marked by the stigma of being a 'lost generation'.

***Plasticine* and its Reception**

In this closing section on the play, it is worth exploring the reception of the critics to the productions of *Plasticine* in Moscow and London. A number of British critics

⁷⁹ Ibid. 38.

interpreted *Plasticine* as a return to the ‘gritty realism’ of nineteenth century Russian literature and theatre. Others, however, saw the play as continuing in the tradition of British ‘In-Yer-Face’ theatre popularised by the Royal Court in the 1990s. In his review of the London production, Michael Billington suggests that Sigarev was attempting to write a ‘Russian *Shopping and Fucking*’.⁸⁰ Likewise, Charles Spencer’s review for *The Telegraph* described the production as ‘bog-standard, ‘In-Yer-Face’ theatre.’⁸¹ ‘In-Yer-Face’ was the appellation given by theatre critic Aleks Sierz to a new generation of young British playwrights who emerged in the 1990s. Sierz sees ‘In-Yer-Face’ as a provocative, taboo breaking, subversive mode of theatre that evokes strong and resonant emotions in its audience, while other scholars have further argued that ‘In-Yer-Face’ theatre has a ‘territory of social realism’.⁸² Interestingly, Russian critics also made similar observations to their British counterparts in their reviews of *Plasticine*. Reviewing the CDR’s production for newspaper *Vedomosti*, Oleg Zintsov writes that ‘*Plasticine* looks like a Russian analogue of the most radical British plays of the 90s’, specifically recalling the plays of Ravenhill and Kane produced at the Royal Court. Comparatively, Vasenina also made a direct reference between the play and Ravenhill’s *Shopping and Fucking* in her review for *Novaya Gazeta*.

In my analysis of *Plasticine*, I argue that Sigarev uses specifically Russia imagery from both Soviet and Tsarist history to interrogate contemporary anxieties about burgeoning inequality and the marginalisation of Russia’s provinces. By framing these contemporary narratives in the context of Russian culture, Sigarev asks his audience to consider the play within a specifically Russian context. I contend that comparisons to British ‘In-Yer-Face’ theatre are reductive, and ignore *Plasticine*’s important engagement with Putinism and the mutable political context of the early 2000s. By illuminating the marginalised and disempowered social groups in the provinces through the exploration of space and language, *Plasticine* dismantles one of Putinism’s foundation myths that the regime brought economic stability and prosperity across the country.

⁸⁰ Billington (2002) Also see Beumers and Lipovetsky (2009) 152. It must also be mentioned that Russian critics were also quick to note the similarities between *Plasticine* and the plays of Ravenhill and Kane: see Zintsov (2001).

⁸¹ Spencer (2002).

⁸² Sierz (2000).

Moscow and the provinces: Sigarev's *Black Milk*

Plasticine is an important play that developed the aesthetics of New Drama. Serebrennikov's innovative production at the CDR set the criterion for New Drama performances, with the use of street clothes, minimal set dressing, and intimate staging with close proximity between the actors and audience. Contemporaneously, Sigarev's linguistic use of *mat*, and the play's interest in provincial life, alongside the widening gap in the standards of living positioned *Plasticine* as an anterior play in the New Drama canon. In *Plasticine*, Sigarev depicts the depravation and bleakness of provincial Russian life. His next play *Black Milk*, explicitly addresses the differences between Moscow and the provinces and the extent to which communities in the east felt excluded from the discourse of Putinism that proclaims a 'united Russia'. Unlike *Plasticine*, *Black Milk* focuses on ideas of money and economy in Putin's Russia. *Black Milk* is a departure from the darkly surreal tones employed by Sigarev in *Plasticine*, and its use of comic tropes and characters to subvert the perceived difference between the capital and Russia's rural communities foregrounds a burgeoning anxiety with Moscow's financial exploitation of the provinces. *Black Milk* is arguably a more candid play than *Plasticine*, and at its fulcrum is an urgent comic dialogue that explores differing attitudes and communities in twenty-first century Russia.

A year after *Plasticine*'s première at the CDR, Sigarev's second full length play *Black Milk* opened at Moscow's Gogol Theatre in September 2002, directed by the theatre's then artistic director Sergei Yashin.⁸³ Like *Plasticine*, the play was staged by the Royal Court a year later in an English-language translation by Sasha Dugdale, and was positively received by British critics. Although staged in the less intimate space of the Gogol Theatre, many of the aesthetic and linguistic elements of *Plasticine* were also employed in *Black Milk*, including the use of contemporary street costume. Departing from the fragmented structured of *Plasticine*, Sigarev divides the play between two acts, which in the narrative of the play take place ten days apart from each other.

As the performance begins, an emotive diegesis is provided by a narrator who enters the stage alone, introducing to the audience the themes of the play and setting the scene for the rest of the performance. Directly addressing the audience, the

⁸³ In August 2012 Yashin stood down as artistic director of the building. His successor, Kirill Serebrennikov renamed the space the Gogol Centre.

narrator describes the location of the play's action, setting it in contrast to the audience's physical location at the Gogol Theatre in central Moscow:

Where should I start? I don't know... with the name of the town, maybe? Well it's not exactly a town. Not even a largish village. Definitely not a village. In fact, it's not really even a populated place. It's a station. Just a station. Somewhere in the middle of My Boundless Motherland. But when I say middle, I don't mean at the heart. Because My Boundless Motherland is a strange animal and its heart, as everyone know, is located at its head.⁸⁴

In these opening lines of the production, Sigarev alludes to a traditional Russian proverb from the nineteenth century that proclaims Moscow to be Russia's 'head'. Sigarev highlights both the geographical expanse between Moscow and Russia's provinces, but also, as the play later reveals, the divergent attitudes towards the country's newfound wealth in these disparate communities. The narrator continues to explain to the audience the setting for the play, revealing the name of the village to be Mokhovoye, adding that it is November and that there is snow covering the ground. He also indicates the exact setting for the action that occurs in *Black Milk*, the interior of Mokhovoye's barren railway station, which he describes as the 'wooden building with a slate roof, standing next to the railway track'.⁸⁵ The set of the Gogol Theatre's production, designed by Elena Kachelaeva, reflects the narrator's spartan description of the waiting room, with only a dilapidated ticket counter and a row of broken wooden seats included on stage. Across the back wall of the performance space runs a line of railway tracks, which Russian theatre critic Maria Odina interprets as connecting the Gogol Theatre's location behind the Kurskii railway station, one of the principal railway terminals in Moscow. Odina contends that the railways lines running off into the distance on stage appear as a continuation of Kurskii station, reinforcing the 'alienation' of Mokhovoye's location in the remote provinces and its spacial detachment from Moscow.⁸⁶

The narrator continues to describe the station's waiting room in further detail noting the squalid left luggage lockers and unpainted walls. Before long however, he

⁸⁴ Sigarev (2003) 3.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Odina (2002).

is interrupted by a collection of loud voices off stage that anticipates the entrance of a young man and women, who open the door to the ticket hall and enter the playing space. The duo that enter are Lyovchik and his pregnant wife 'Poppet', a disputatious couple from Moscow, who have been unscrupulously selling inferior Chinese 'supertoasters' to unsuspecting locals in the provinces of the 'boundless motherland'.⁸⁷ As the couple enter the station their supercilious revulsion at the lack of cleanliness of both the station and the inhabitants of Mokhovoye raises questions about the stereotypical prejudices held by urbanites on life in rural provinces, and further sets up the city versus countryside narrative that is the crux of the play.

As has been examined earlier in this chapter not only did Putin's economic policies herald a widening in the gap between rich and poor, but also heightened economic divisions between wealthy urban areas in the west of the country, and rural regions in the provinces. In the play's first act, this divide is evoked through Lyovchik and Poppet's tense interactions with the locals who confront them at the train station. Although Lyovchik and Poppet's visit to Mokhovoye has been a business success and they have succeeded in offloading a multitude of toasters to the unsuspecting villagers, they soon realise that due to the limited train service they will have to spend the night in the station before the first train back to Moscow the next morning. Despite this, Lyovchik and Poppet's business acumen remains and they succeed in selling a toaster to the ticket clerk at the station who purchases the defective machinery even though she sees through the couple's ruse. The dialogue between Lyovchik and the clerk foregrounds that the young Muscovites are out of touch with the realities of life outside of their city and the actual needs of their customers that they hawk their imported supertoasters to:

CLERK: You haven't got any winter boots?

LYOVCHIK: 'Fraid not

CLERK: Shame. I'd have taken the boots. I'm in these felt ones. No gloves?⁸⁸

When the villagers, who have tracked the couple to the station, confront them after realising they have been conned into making purchases they don't need through

⁸⁷ In the playtext's list of characters, Sigarev notes that Poppet's real name is Shura. However, throughout the script she is referred to as 'Little' (*Melkii*). In my analysis of *Black Milk*, use Sasha Dugdale's translation of her sobriquet as 'Poppet'.

⁸⁸ Sigarev (2003) 13.

Lyovchik and Poppet's chicanery, Poppet is startled into labour by a local alcoholic Mishanya, who fires a rifle loaded with blanks in a drunken stupor. Here, Sigarev plays on a satirical paradox, that while Lyovchik and Poppet have outwitted the residents of Mokhovoye, their basic lack of knowledge about pregnancy is exposed:

POPPET: But how come? It's too early.

CLERK: Well no one asked you. You're giving birth and that's it.

LYOVCHIK: But how come? It's too early.

CLERK: How many months?

POPPET: Eight

CLERK: That's it then. Why did you decide to come to the middle of nowhere just when you were due?

LYOVCHIK: But people have babies after nine months...

CLERK: Who told you that?

LYOVCHIK: That's how it's always been. Says in books.⁸⁹

Despite being well read, Lyovchik and Poppet fail when it comes to their erudition about the basic act of childbirth, demonstrating a gulf in attitudes between the Moscow couple and the inhabitants of Mokhovoye. Indeed, much of the text focuses on a comic dialogue between imagined representations of Moscow and the provinces. The play is perhaps, best summed up by the speech made by the ticket clerk to Poppet and Lyovchik after the dialogue above:

When you get back to [Moscow] you can tell them how people live in Russia, 'cause they don't have the faintest idea. Even if God was supposed to knock us out equal, we're only equal on the outside. Two arms, two legs and a head with a body. Every other way we're different. We're so different it's frightening.⁹⁰

The clerk's speech allows Sigarev's primarily urban, Muscovite audience to consider the wider economic and geographical divisions in twenty-first century Russia, and additionally invites them to interrogate their own prejudices about rural society.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 34.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 35.

Furthermore, as has been detailed above critics of the Putin regime including Navalny and Politkovskaia have underscored how the glaring neglect of the Russian provinces by the Kremlin represents the inherent corruption and failing of Putinism. Politkovskaia's sardonic statement quoted earlier in this chapter that 'Moscow is life-giving warmth and light, while the provinces are its pale reflection, and those who inhabit them might as well be living on the moon' reflects a concern that the growing divide in both attitudes and wealth between the provinces and the west of Russia is dangerous and harmful to the solidarity of the country's citizens. That Muscovites see provincials as 'from the moon' implies that they have little compassion for them or interest in supporting them for the greater good of Russia. Although Sigarev has never publically expressed dissent against the Putin regime, it can be assumed that he would expect his audience to recognise the polemical similarities between the opinions voiced in *Black Milk* and the opposition movement.

The action continues in act two, which is set ten days later in the same station, as Lyovchik and Poppet prepare to return to Moscow with their new born baby. The second half of the play signals a reversal in the imagined contrasts between the capital and Mokhovoye. While in act one the inhabitants are portrayed as violent and uncultured alcoholics, Poppet is now attached to life in Mokhovoye, and denounces her previously held Muscovite values. Poppet, who has been deeply affected by the generosity shown by the inhabitants of the town, experiences a conversion to the rural lifestyle of the village and proposes to Lyovchik that they stay, using the proceeds from their Moscow apartment to help re-build the town. When Lyovchik replies mockingly, Poppet violently accosts him with her appraisal of urban morality:

It's trendy to be a bitch there.... Trendy to hate and look down on everyone. You look at them and feel bitter inside. They look at you and feel bitter inside. Everyone joins in...it's like we're doomed. Little boy comes up to you in the street and asks for bread and you tell him to fuck off. Even if something inside you wants to give him a few kopecks. But you tell him to fuck off. 'Cause no one else gives him any money, so why should you.'⁹¹

⁹¹ Ibid. 53.

Poppet's speech is a damning attack on Moscow society and the neo-liberal capitalism she and Lyovchik exploit. It is a polemical rejection of nouveau middle class values in Russia by Sigarev. As Ben Judha observes, these factions in Russia disdained the new middle classes accusing them of 'thinking only as consumers, rather than citizens.'⁹² The role played by the village of Mokhovoye in the second act of the play epitomises Poppet's desire to reject the 'trendy' cynicism of Putin's Russia. She finds moral afflatus in the simplicity of rural life, and idealises the possibility of raising her daughter in the countryside. Poppet's imagined future, paradoxically contrasts with Siagrev's portrayal of the inhabitants of Mokhovoye in Act One as violent and hostile towards outsiders, especially those from Moscow. Poppet's desire to reject her urban life and help restore the village of Mokhovoye is ultimately undermined by the play's final scene, when she joins Lyovchik on the returning train to Moscow. For Poppet, the all-consuming allure of the city and capitalism proves to be inescapable and inevitable. As I shall now further examine, by juxtaposing Moscow and Mokhovoye as polarised societies in direct conflict with each other, Sigarev articulates specific anxieties about Putinism's response to the widening inequality in contemporary Russia.

Temporality and the Provinces

Some reviewers of the Gogol's Centre's production surmise that in *Black Milk*, Sigarev employs stock comic themes of urban cynicism pitted against rural naivety. For example, Rudnev summarises that *Black Milk* plays on easy archetypal myths that rural Russian life is simplistic and idyllic, but marred by rampant alcoholism.⁹³ Similarly to Rudnev, John Freedman is critical of Yashin's production at the Gogol Theatre, arguing that it 'is blatantly constructed on stock characters and situations'⁹⁴ Arguably, however, Sigarev's contrasting of rural and urban attitudes foregrounds the issues addressed in the play as a form of social debate. As in *Plasticine*, Sigarev depicts a world that is in spatial and temporal fluctuation and metamorphosis. In the narrator's opening monologue he details the timetable at the local train station, announcing that:

⁹² Judah (2013) 143.

⁹³ Rudnev (2002).

⁹⁴ Freedman (2002)

not even all the trains stop here. The 6.37 and 22.41 Eastbound and 9.13 Westbound and that's it. That is it...⁹⁵

Here, Sigarev sets out the premise that time can take on a different significance in provincial Russia. Additionally, it reminds his audience how since the collapse of communism rural communities have become increasingly marginalised and isolated from the rest of the country. As Russian theatre critic Grigorii Zaslavskii observes in his review of the play's production at the Gogol Centre, 'if the trains from the station [in Mokhovoye] went with Soviet regularity, the play would not have happened'.⁹⁶

The temporal dramaturgy of *Black Milk* is concerned with how time is interpreted differently in relation to spatial setting. In act one, Lyovchik and Poppet are astonished to discover Poppet has gone into labour, believing that it is too early in her pregnancy for her to give birth. Lyovchik explains to the ticket clerk at the station that it is impossible that Poppet's water has broken because she is only eight months pregnant and that 'people have babies after nine months', knowledge he acquired from a book.⁹⁷ Lyovchik and Poppet's bookish assumption that birth will occur at a defined and fixed period nine months into a pregnancy suggests an understanding of time as fixed and linear. Sigarev presents Lyovchik and Poppet as part of a Moscow demographic that is insular and whose knowledge is acquired from books rather than lived experiences, highlights how time and linearity acquire different meaning in different geographical areas.

Black Milk attempts to challenge the idea of Russian society as unified under Putin's patriotic programme and state building exercises. Putin's claim that the entire country is 'united around patriotic values to overcome economic problems' is interrogated and dismantled in *Black Milk*.⁹⁸ In Sigarev's text the other characters often disparagingly refer to Poppet as a young child. In particular, Lyovchik's denigration of her in the second act repeatedly takes the form of insults that infantilise her: 'how many abortions did you have, little girl?'; 'What's wrong, little girl?'⁹⁹ In addition, the clerk at the station similarly asks Poppet 'what you being like a little

⁹⁵ Sigarev (2003) 3.

⁹⁶ Zaslavskii (2002).

⁹⁷ Sigarev (2003) 34.

⁹⁸ Seddon (2016).

⁹⁹ Sigarev (2002) 58 and 59.

schoolgirl for?’¹⁰⁰ In the Gogol Theatre’s production Poppet’s childlike demeanour is heightened by the fact that actor Alla Karavatskaya, who played Poppet, repeatedly eats Chupa Chups lollipops throughout the performance. Like Maksim in *Plasticine*, Poppet is portrayed as being in limbo, and unable to reach adulthood despite her desire to better herself and be a good mother. Although she becomes a parent in the second act she remains stuck in childhood and infantilised by her husband and the inhabitants of Mokhovoye. This is contrasted with Lyovchik’s description of Pasha, the generous woman who looks after Poppet after she gives birth and nurses her back to health, as a ‘chatty old lady’, despite being reminded Pasha is ‘only coming up to fifty.’¹⁰¹ Sigarev uses age to distinguish between the two disparate worlds of Moscow and Mokhovoye. Poppet’s infantilisation in contrast with description of Pasha as old, suggests the idea that Moscow represents the new Russia of Putinism.

This temporality takes on a further political dimension in act one, when communist Mishanya enters the ticket hall in a drunken stupor. In Yashin’s production at the Gogol Centre, Mishanya wears a long winter coat with the name of leader of the Communist Party of Russia Gennady Zyuganov inscribed on the back. As Mishanya drunkenly staggers around the stage he evokes Russia’s communist past by singing traditional songs from the Soviet stage. In Mishanya’s comic dialogue with the clerk at the ticket booth, Sigarev further recalls the Soviet past, when Mishanya shouts ‘Answer, when Comrade Yezhov speaks to you!’¹⁰² The humorous context of Mishanya’s character raises serious points of contention about contemporary Russian politics. Firstly, it highlights the political discord in the country and how communist sympathies are still strong in rural areas. Furthermore, it shows the residents of Mokhovoye as being out of touch with modern politics. Instead they are entrenched in evoking Soviet communism rather than the new neo-liberalism and commercialism espoused by the Putin regime.

Although *Black Milk* plays on easy comic targets and ‘stock’ stereotypes about the disparate characteristics of Moscow and the provinces, the production is a further example of how Sigarev’s dramaturgy directly responds to Putinism and echoes contemporaneous political anxieties expressed in contemporary Russia. Through the play’s comic engagement with Putinism’s erosion of the quality of life in the east of

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 34.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 43.

¹⁰² Ibid. 30.

the country, Sigarev eschews the official state narrative that the Russian electorate is unified behind the Putin regime.

Conclusion

The impact of economic and social degradation in the Russian provinces, both during the 1990s and the supposed ‘boom’ years under the Putin regime, was to effectuate the emergence of New Drama and its early thematics. The emergence of a consumerist middle class in the 1990s and subsequently under Putinism has helped in created a burgeoning divide in society, which Chebankova argues has resulted in ‘the most important socio-political problems, as well as the concerns of the largest share of the population [failing to be] properly articulated.’¹⁰³

Analysis of Sigarev’s two plays *Plasticine* and *Black Milk* in relation to the emerging debate about the concern over a widening gap in living standards and the creation of a new ‘underclass’ in Russia provides vital contexts for the examination of New Drama. In this chapter, I have argued that Sigarev’s theatre specifically examines provincial life as a starting point for provoking wider debate on the nature of Russian politics in the twenty-first century. The productions’ staging of the provinces establishes an important context in which theatre makers have sought to consider and critique the Putin regime’s economic policies, which have privileged Russia’s large cities in the west. By staging marginalised voices and oppositional discourses, these two plays articulate and make visible in a public sphere dialogues that subvert Putin’s state-building narrative of a ‘united’ and unified population. By foregrounding the political context of *Plasticine* and *Black Milk*, I have illuminated how these plays are rooted in the contemporary reality of twenty-first century Russia and Putinism. *Plasticine* is driven by the examination of social divides and hierarchies in contemporary Russia, through the use of space and language to stage and foreground demographics excluded from social and political discourse. In *Black Milk*, Sigarev creates a comic conflict between the urban and the rural that highlights social divides and subverts the normative discourse of an electorate united behind the policies of Putinism.

Furthermore, I have suggested that interpretations of Sigarev’s plays as archetypal reproduction of British ‘In-Yer-Face’ are reductive and simplistic. Instead,

¹⁰³ Chebankova (2013) 66.

Sigarev weaves Russia themes and contexts into the plays that make use of specific historical contexts from both Tsarist and Soviet Russia. I contend that these productions do not only hold up a mirror to the plight of the provincial poor for the entertainment of urbanite Russian and international audiences in the West, but instead form part of the important canon of New Drama plays that explicitly exert Russian themes to contextualise contemporary politics and Putinism, exposing their audience to alternative and marginalised discourses and oppositional ideas.

In the final chapter of this thesis I will consider how theatre makers have employed documentary theatre techniques to respond the Putin regime's manipulation of the legal system in a series of high profile trials. It will investigate the ways in which two significant documentary theatre plays produced by Teatr.doc have attempted to articulate contemporary anxieties about Putin's 'fictitious legalism'. The productions' staging of verbatim testimony and the reproduction of physical documents encourages the audience to be active participants in the documentation of the Kremlin's manipulation of justice.

Chapter Five: Dissent and Documentary: Performing Justice in Teatr.doc's *The Bolotnaya Square Case* and *One Hour Eighteen Minutes*

Introduction

This chapter investigates how theatre makers in Russia have responded to the arrest, detention, and trials of those who have dared expose or challenge the power structure implemented by the Kremlin. In particular, since 2010 there has been an emergence of a national and international debate on the manipulation of the judicial system in Russia, emanating from the media coverage of high profile cases such as the trial of three members of the feminist punk-rock group Pussy Riot in 2012. A small, but vocal minority of Russian academics and commentators have suggested that the Russian legal system constructs judicial narratives tendentious to the Kremlin, while contemporaneously the authorities have repressed and destabilised those who seek to challenge and expose the extant corruption of the Putin regime.¹ The litigious assailment of groups and individuals through the creation of mistrust and fear aims to further deter the spread of wider dissent towards the government.

This chapter focuses on two documentary plays, *The Bolotnaya Square Case* (2015) by Polina Borodina and *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* (2010, expanded in 2012) by Elena Gremina, which both interrogate and construct their own notion of justice in Putin's Russia. Both plays were originally staged at Moscow's Teatr.doc, where I attended performances of *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* and *The Bolotnaya Square Case* in October 2012 and November 2015 respectively.² *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* has been published in an English-language translation by Stephen Nuns and Yury Urnov in John Freedman's *Real and Phantom Pains: An Anthology of New Russian Drama*, and although there is no commercially available script of *The Bolotnaya Square Case*, quotations appear courtesy of an unpublished copy of the text kindly shared with me by the play's director Elena Gremina. The translation is my own.

Scholarship on twenty-first century Russian drama has paid particular interest to the development of documentary theatre and use of verbatim techniques by

¹ See, for example, Rogov (2012), and human rights activist Lev Ponomaryov's warning that Putin's decision to slash the jury in trials from twelve members to six would produce greater impartiality and manipulation of the legal system, while favouring the prosecution. Berseneva (2015).

² I also saw a performance of *The Bolotnaya Square Case* when it was staged at the Stage Theatre Festival in Helsinki on 15 August 2015.

playwrights. As a result there is a significant body of work that details a variety of plays from 1999 onwards. Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky's book *Performing Violence* dedicates a chapter to the rise of documentary theatre at Teatr.doc, focusing on Elena Gremina and Mikhail Ugarov's play *September.doc* (2005). Molly Flynn's unpublished thesis *Documentary Theatre in Twenty-First Century Russia: teatr, v kotorom ne igrailut* is the first full-length study of the explosion of documentary theatre in the 2000s and 2010s. In 2015, the Russian-language journal *Teatr* published a special edition devoted to documentary theatre, with articles and interviews from many of Russia's leading theatre practitioners. These dynamic scholarly works have been vital in forming a wider understanding of the copious and varied documentary productions staged in Russia since 1999. Scholars underscore documentary theatre's engagement with the political discourse of the 2000s through its 'normalization of the abnormal'.³ These studies, however, make only passing reference to the context of Putinism and the opposition movement in their analysis of documentary theatre.

This chapter examines the relationship between Russian documentary theatre and the Kremlin's politicisation of justice and the legal system. Through close analysis of the performances of *The Bolotnaya Square Case* and *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* and this key facet of Putinism, I argue that Russian theatre-makers have employed documentary theatre techniques to challenge the social norms and discourses of the regime, while promoting engagement in civic activity. Interrogating these plays in the context of the opposition movement raises important questions about the origins of documentary theatre in Russia. Critical writing on Russian documentary theatre has acknowledged a wide variety of influences on the extensive canon of 'theatre of the real' performances produced since 2000.⁴ Some commentators, including Moscow-based theatre critic Elena Kovalskaya, acknowledge the influence of British drama and pinpoint the Royal Court's series of workshops on verbatim theatre staged by the theatre's International Department in 1999 as the *chairs* moment in the evolution of Russian documentary theatre.⁵ Contrastingly, others trace documentary theatre back to pre-existing dramatic

³ Beumers and Lipovetsky (2009) 217.

⁴ For a definition of 'theatre of the real' see Martin (2013) 5.

⁵ Kovalskaya (2015). Kovalskaya's memorable analogy is that introducing Russian dramatists to verbatim theatre was like adding Mentos to a bottle of Sprite. Also see Beumers and Lipovetsky (2009) 211.

traditions originally developed in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union.⁶ While these are vital theatrical lineages to consider, this chapter re-frames the contested genealogy of Russian documentary theatre by linking the performance of documents and evidence with a pertinent form of dissent and opposition that occurred in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, known as *samizdat*. *Samizdat* was a form of self-publishing that re-produced literature doctored or banned by state censorship, including court proceedings and legal documents.⁷ Central to defining *samizdat* is the importance placed on of the act of documentation itself. Russian dissident Vladimir Bukovsky attests that the creation, documentation, and re-production of these banned texts, facilitated by the technological advances in portable typewriters in the 1950s, were an important feature of protest against the Soviet government: ‘I would erect a monument to the typewriter, too. It brought forth a poem. It brought forth a new form of publishing, *samizdat*, or “self-publishing”: write myself, edit myself, censor myself, publish myself, distribute myself.’⁸ Considering *samizdat* as a paradigm for contemporary documentary theatre in Russia foregrounds the act of documentation and provides a fresh perspective of New Drama’s precarious engagement with Putinism.

I open this chapter with a survey of a series of high-profile trials in contemporary Russia, linking them to anxieties over a potential return to Stalinist repression and an augmented scepticism of the integrity of the legal system. Next, I describe the influence of verbatim and tribunal theatre on Russian documentary theatre. While I acknowledge the important links these theatrical techniques have with the case studies, I supplement the narrative by introducing *samizdat* in the context of the productions’ consideration of the Russian juridical system and use of legal documentation. Through a close reading of *The Bolotnaya Square Case*, I move on to consider how Borodina’s use of verbatim testimony and documentation resists the official discourse of the Putin regime. Finally, this chapter considers how *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* demonstrates the importance of physical documentation as a provocation against the Putin regime’s whitewashing of politically motivated manipulations of justice.

⁶ For example, see Davidova (2015), Radosavljevic (2013), Mizoev (2004), Bolotyan (2004), Timasheva (2002), and Chepurov (2001).

⁷ See Feldbrugge (1975)19-20, Skilling (1989) 6-7, and Bukovsky (1978) 241.

⁸ Bukovsky (1978) 115.

Justice in post-Soviet Russia

The election of Putin's hand-picked successor Dmitry Medvedev as President in 2008 led to the continuation of 'Putinism without Putin', and heralded a rise in authoritarian policies, violations of the rule of law, and attacks on civil society. The Medvedev administration continued to implement Putin's authoritarian restrictions on media coverage and the activities of Non-Governmental Organisations. Writing three years into Medvedev's term as president in 2011, scholar of Russian politics Stephen White opined that 'press freedom [is] in further decline with the Kremlin relying on Soviet-style media management to facilitate a sensitive political transition to deflect responsibility for widespread corruption and political violence.'⁹ As Putin's grip on power strengthened during the 2010s, through the implementation of a series of punitive political repressions on civil liberties and legislature, there has been a renewed debate on the re-politicisation of justice, which has led some commentators to consider the spectre of Stalinism, show trials, and the Great Terror in modern Russia. For example, commenting on the prosecution of opposition activists who protested at Bolotnaya on 6 May 2012, the Russian broadsheet newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* drew attention to the similarities between the manner of their arrests and the execution of Stalin's purges.¹⁰ This is significant because, as Russian scholar Rosalind Marsh points out, in the 1990s the horrors of Stalinism were perceived to belong to a historical period that was no longer seen as relevant to or commensurate with post-Communist Russia.¹¹ The stifling of free speech and civic activism by the Kremlin, particularly in the 2010s as Putin returned to the presidency, have been the trigger for a greater proportion of Russians to look back to Stalinism and the Soviet era as an analogy for contemporary politics. Putin's re-election in February 2012 marked a further turn in political repercussions towards those who criticise the power structures of Putinism. These trials against politicians and campaigners has varied from the global news coverage and international outcry of the trial and subsequent jailing for two years of Pussy Riot members Maria Alyokhina, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, and Yekaterina Samutsevich on charges of hooliganism for their 'punk prayer' in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on 21 February 2012, to

⁹ White (2011) 355.

¹⁰ Rogov (2012).

¹¹ Marsh (2007) 427.

the equally contested - although less cited in the western press - corruption charges brought against human rights activist and mayor of Yaroslavl, Yevgeny Urlashov, in 2013.

In the same *Novaya Gazeta* article referenced above, Russian academic Kirill Rogov has described what he terms 'Putin's fictitious legalism'.¹² This can be defined as Putin's repressive manipulation of the Russian legal system in order to attack his enemies and maintain unmitigated control of power in the Kremlin, coupled with the media saturation of a pro-Putin agenda that undermines these nascent threats to Putinism. In their coverage of events such as the anti-Putin protests of 2011-2012, state television channels broadcast biased material, such as NTV's pseudo-documentary *The Anatomy of Protest*, which aimed to polarise the opposition movement and create an atmosphere of fear amongst the general population by depicting the protestors as violent aggressors against the state and Russian morals. A pertinent example of this manipulation of the legal system to assail political challenges and disrupt the process of democracy in Russia has been the trial of oligarch and owner of the Yukos Oil Company, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, in December 2010. A staunch critic of Putinism, Khodorkovsky had been jailed in October 2003 on charges of fraud and tax evasion, but had vociferously continued his polemical attack on the government from his prison cell. Viewed as one of the few genuine political threats to Putin's autocracy, Khodorkovsky was tried again between March 2009 and December 2010 while still in prison, after new charges emerged of embezzling the entire oil production of Yukos and laundering the proceeds. His sentence was subsequently extended until 2017.¹³ Opposition supporters in Russia labelled the trial as 'politically motivated', and Khodorkovsky's sentence was interpreted as clear evidence of political oppression in Russia spearheaded by the Kremlin against potential rivals to Putin and the regime.¹⁴ Public support for Khodorkovsky continued to be sympathetic and, in the campaign for the 2012 presidential election, all candidates, with the notable exception of Putin, pledged to exonerate him if elected. According to Richard Sakwa in his recent study of the Yukov affair, *Putin and the Oligarch*, by the end of 2011 only ten per cent of Russians considered the verdict of

¹² Rogov (2012).

¹³ Khodorkovsky was subsequently released on 21 December 2013 after being pardoned by Putin the previous day. He currently lives in exile in London.

¹⁴ *Guardian* (2009).

the trial to be just.¹⁵ In a further damning indictment of the trial verdict in February 2012 - the same month that Putin was re-elected for his third term as President of Russia - an official public inquiry into the 2009-2010 prosecution of Khodorkovsky asserted that the result had been 'illegal', and called for an annulment of the verdict and the immediate release of Khodorkovsky. In 2013 it was announced that Teatr.doc would be producing a new show on the Khodorkovsky affair, although to date this has yet to be staged.¹⁶

A second example of Putin's 'fictitious legalism' can be seen in the judicial affair from which one of this chapter's case studies takes its name, the Bolotnaya Square Case. The Bolotnaya case revolved around the prosecution of 28 protestors who had participated in the Moscow demonstrations of 6 May 2012. The case takes its name from the square in central Moscow where an estimated 20,000 protestors had gathered to hear speeches from leading opposition activists such as Serge Udaltsov and Alexei Navalny. As evening approached, pockets of violence broke out as police clashed with the protestors and, by the end of the day more than 400 demonstrators had been arrested at the square. Most of those detained were quickly released without charge, as was often the case after protests; what happened next, however, was unexpected and unprecedented in post-Soviet Russia. In the following weeks and months, police and detectives gathered evidence on the violence and disorder during the rally, before staging a series of aggressive raids and arrests in the middle of the night. None of the 28 protestors arrested had police records, nor were any of them high-profile figures in the opposition movement. The activists represented a wide section of Russian society from young students to older professionals in their fifties. The protracted trial of the Bolotnaya protestors was condemned internationally by human rights groups, including Amnesty International who, after the conviction of eight members of the group in 2014, wrote that

the defendants in this trial were confronted by abusive use of force by police. Some of them sought to prevent violence, others to protect themselves. A few were just caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. All are victims of a politically motivated show trial.¹⁷

¹⁵ Sakwa (2014b) 152.

¹⁶ *Lenta.ru* (2013).

¹⁷ Amnesty International (2014).

To date, many charges are still being brought against the protestors, as the case continues to operate as a deterrent to discourage further anti-Putin activism or protest. The Bolotnaya Square case marked a turning point in twenty-first century Russian politics. It was the first time since the Communist era that there had been the wide spread prosecution of political protestors in Russia. The case was evidently designed to pressure the opposition into passivity and instill fear into anyone who might consider taking part in an anti-government demonstration. Additionally, at the same time that the protestors were being rounded up by the police in June 2012, the state Duma passed a new law imposing severe penalties for participation in unlicensed protests and political rallies - a further tactic to install an atmosphere of fear against anyone who might oppose the Putin regime.

So far I have demonstrated the wider implications of the Kremlin's use of the legal system to prosecute and deter activists and individuals who pose a threat to Putin's authority. Firstly, the evocation of the spectre of Soviet repression and purges by Human Rights organisations and Russian commentators, unusual in Russia prior to Putinism, is an example of what some critics of the Kremlin see as Putin's 'fictitious legalism', and a return to an era of censorship not seen since before *Glasnost* in the 1980s. Secondly, a derivative of fictitious legalism was the propagation of a discourse in the state media, including NTV's *The Anatomy of Protest*, which aimed to incite fear and suspicion into civic life dividing the populace against the anti-Putin movement. Finally, as the public reaction to Khodorkovsky's trial and sentence in 2010 demonstrates, there is a distinctive mistrust of the notion of justice in Russia. The draconian trials and jailing of Pussy Riot and the Bolotnaya Square protestors in 2012 and beyond were intended to be interpreted as the actions of a strong leader bringing calm to the country and uniting it against a deviant faction in society. The results, however, have been the opposite. Russian society was left deeply fractured, and a sense of mistrust and general fear was entrenched in the electorate, right across the political divide.¹⁸

Russian dramatists have responded to this upsurge in trials and questions on the notion of justice in contemporary Russia by employing documentary theatre techniques. In the following section, I will explore and historicise the extraordinary

¹⁸ For example see *Colta* (2012).

rise in documentary theatre and the technique of verbatim among Russian dramatists in the 2000s. Linking back to this section, I will then identify and contextualise documentary theatre of the Putin era in relation to *samizdat* texts of Soviet Russia. While *The Bolotnaya Square Case* and *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* undeniably draw from the theatrical genealogies of verbatim theatre and tribunal theatre, I argue that *samizdat*'s concern for documenting trial proceedings allows us to use it as a further paradigm for understanding Teatr.doc's staging of documentation in their interrogation of the state's 'fictitious legalism'.

The Rise of Documentary in Russia

According to theatre critic Pavel Rudnev, contemporary political theatre is synonymous with the technique of verbatim, and he succinctly argues that 'the strongest political focus is visible in the documentary theatre movement' exemplified by Moscow's Teatr.doc, the Joseph Beuys Theatre, and the Baltic House Theatre in St. Petersburg.¹⁹ Verbatim theatre is an appellation first used by British theatre scholar Derek Paget in his seminal article "'Verbatim Theatre: Oral History and Documentary Techniques' to describe a 'form of documentary drama which employs (largely or exclusively) tape-recorded material from the "real-life" originals of the characters and events to which it gives dramatic shape'.²⁰ In the introduction to their book *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Theatre Practices*, Will Hammond and Dan Steward further elucidate the definition of the practice:

The term *verbatim* refers to the origins of the text spoken in the play. The words of real people are recorded or transcribed by a dramatist during an interview or research process, or are appropriated from existing records such as the transcripts of an official enquiry. They are then edited, arranged or decontextualized to form a dramatic presentation, in which actors take on the real individuals whose words are being used.²¹

In the latter twentieth century, the verbatim theatre technique has emerged as a global practice used by a variety of practitioners to create a diverse theatrical body of work.

¹⁹ Rudnev (2014).

²⁰ Paget (1987) 317.

²¹ Hammond and Stewart (2008) 9.

As Hammond and Steward concede, the verbatim term ‘can be used to describe plays that are sometimes so dissimilar that the term may appear to be of little value.’²² The verbatim technique falls into what American theatre scholar Carol Martin terms ‘theatre of the real’ that describes ‘documentary theatre, verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre, theatre of fact, theatre of witness, tribunal theatre, nonfiction theatre, restored village performances, war and battle re-enactments, and autobiographical theatre.’²³ In keeping with Hammond and Steward’s assertion that verbatim is a mercurial term that describes multiple techniques rather than a precise theatrical form, co-artistic director of Teatr.doc, Mikhail Ugarov, states that New Drama does not adhere to a ‘strict verbatim’ and that it is, instead, ‘used with a lot of options and a lot of prospects for a variety of applications in the theater.’²⁴ In Russia, the verbatim term has manifested as a less formal technique than the one described by Paget and Hammond and Steward.

As I have already set out in Chapter One of this thesis, the British notion of verbatim theatre was first introduced to Russian theatre makers through a series of seminars and playwriting workshops for young playwrights and directors staged by the Royal Court’s International Department in Moscow throughout 1999 and 2000. In the case of *The Bolotnaya Square Case* and *One Hour Eighteen Minutes*, I argue that what unites these two plays is their use of documents and the material act of documentation. It is therefore, important to take into account historical further precedents for the significance of documentation and its consideration in the political context of Putin’s Russia. Given the context of this study it is useful to consider a specific development in Russian civic engagement that is analogous to verbatim theatre in its privileging of documents as an important tool against political repression.

Samizdat

The connection between Russian political dissent and documentation can be traced back to the turn from feudalism to capitalism in the 1860s and 1870s. Socialist agitators known as the *Narodniks* circulated unpublished political manifestos and tracts containing verbatim and quotidian adages in rural areas under the slogan of

²² Ibid.

²³ Martin (2013) 5.

²⁴ Ugarov (2012).

‘going to the people’. Under a growing climate of new political repression in the 1920s, banned literature began to be reproduced and circulated independently of the state-controlled publishing houses. In the aftermath of the Stalin era, there was a further augmentation in the production and distribution of unauthorised documents and texts. After a brief period of liberalisation under the premiership of Nikita Khrushchev, there was a rescinding of cultural freedoms and personal expression. In the 1960s, the term *samizdat* (self-publishing) appeared as a means to describe the manifold collection of documents that ranged from reproductions of banned literary works such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973) to political statements and provocations. Nadezhda Mandelstam’s memoir *Hope Against Hope* (1970), which vividly recalls the arrest, interrogation, and ultimately the death of her husband, the poet Osip Mandelstam, for his satirical portrayal of Joseph Stalin in 1933 became an important part of this illicit literary canon in the 1960s, before it was published in an English-language translation in 1970. Although very few physical manuscripts of the text circulated, Mandelstam’s documentation of the events was further transmitted through word of mouth, entering the oral lore of Soviet Russia.²⁵

This private reproduction of literature doctored or banned by official Soviet censorship for deviating from the accepted Communist discourse of the Soviet Union, was disseminated and shared among readers who were primarily comprised of the anti-Soviet intelligentsia. In other words, *samizdat* constituted an enlivening and dilating of civic discourse and debate, and was a vital form of dissent during the political and cultural stagnation of the Brezhnev years. Yuli Kim, a prominent dissident in the 1960s and 70s whose satirical songs form an important part of the body of *samizdat* material, writes in a self-published *samizdat* polemic:

If there had been no ‘samizdat’ in Russian literature, we would have lost Radishchev’s novel [*Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*], *Woe from Wit* of Griboyedov, and many poems by Pushkin. In our times as well, the solicitude of a group of readers towards the unpublished word will carry forward to better times the genuine creativity of our contemporaries.²⁶

²⁵ See Holmgren (1993) 21-3.

²⁶ Kim in Sosin (1975) 308.

Here, Kim articulates a specific concern that if periods of political and cultural repression are not recorded or documented they face the danger of being expunged from history and the populace's cultural memories. Furthermore, Kim hints at the importance, not just of the creation of social commentary and subversive art, but of the 'solicitude' of its documentation and dissemination amongst the consumers. As has been suggested above, these anxieties about the manipulation of historical narratives to suit political motivations have been revived under Putinism, particularly in respect of the Russian legal system and the state media's spinning of acts of opposition. In the twenty-first century, these concerns have found a prolocutor in the documentary plays of Teatr.doc, and the proliferation of statements made by Russian playwrights that address analogous unease about the verisimilitude of state-sanctioned discourses. In an interview given with American theatre academic Tom Sellar for the journal *Theatre*, Elena Gremina has attested to the importance of 'speak[ing] up and [continuing] the dialogue [otherwise] it turns into a deeper neurosis'.²⁷ In the programme for *The Bolotnaya Square Case*, director Gremina writes:

Society in the case of the 'Bolotnaya Affair' could not change anything, so they just try to forget what has happened. But there are people who do not want this and cannot do so [...] Teatr.doc could not shy away from this.²⁸

Audience members in the post-show discussions for *The Bolotnaya Square Case* have echoed these two statements, where it is often proclaimed that 'this needs to be heard'. Anna Gaskarnova - wife of one of the jailed Bolotnaya protestors, and a participant in Teatr.doc's verbatim research for the play – echoed this in a statement she gave after attending a performance of *The Bolotnaya Square Case*:

I had always wondered whether anything except shame, three and a half lost years, and painful memories would remain after the Boltnaya Square trial, something decent and instructive – not for us relatives but for those [who] were there with us on Bolotnaya Square on May 6, 2012, and for those who were not. I think this question has stopped vexing me. Stalin's purges have left us Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* and Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*. The

²⁷ Gremina (2006) 136.

²⁸ *The Bolotnaya Square Case* Production Programme (2015).

Bolotnaya Square case will leave behind Teatr.doc's *The Bolotnaya Square Case*.²⁹

The connection made by Gaskarnova here is clear. The undertaking of the sharing and witnessing of *samizdat* documents and facts was an act of protest against the Soviet regime that allowed the traumatic history of the Stalin era to survive for future generations. Similarly, in *The Bolotnaya Square Case* the fact that the audience is able to hear and experience this testimony is in itself an act of opposition against the regime. By hearing the re-telling of these stories in a theatrical context the audience are participating in a form of dissent against Putin. Like the producers of *samizdat* in the 1960s, documentary theatre of the 2000s asserts the importance of witnessing these political acts and documenting and performing them in public spaces as a form of dissent and civic activity. The documentary plays of the 2000s and 2010s are part of a wider genealogy of Russian dissent and protest that is concerned with how the memory of politically troubled times are documented and remembered in the face of oppression. As political stagnation returned in the 1960s under Brezhnev, so did the proliferation of *samizdat* and documentation; and under the autocracy of Putinism, these fears are again being explored through the technique of verbatim theatre.

Martin states that 'inherent in the very idea of documentary is an anxiety about truth and authenticity.'³⁰ Indeed, a deep concern about truth and authenticity is bound up with the Russian legal system and its potential for exploitation and politicisation by various governments. This is evident in both works of *samizdat* and the two contemporary examples of Russian theatre examined in this chapter. Anxieties around notions of justice in Russia have emphasised the importance of the veracity of documents, and resulted in the interrogation of trial procedures and sentencing results through the documentation and dissemination of testimony and suppressed texts. Both Ferdinand Feldbrugge and Gayle Hollander note, in their respective studies of dissent in the Soviet Union, that *samizdat* materials were often concerned with legal questions and notions of justice and were a conduit for documenting and protesting against Soviet trial practices.³¹ The concern of these documents was not only to reveal the nebulous functioning of Russia's judiciary, but also to record the measures taken

²⁹ Gaskarnova (2015)

³⁰ Martin (2010) 1.

³¹ Feldbrugge (1975) 19-22 and Hollander (1975) 265.

by the Soviet government in repressing dissent among the liberal intelligentsia in Soviet Russia, and they were rarely published in an official, state sanctioned capacity. *Samizdat* producers disseminated trial reports including proceedings of criminal courts, psychiatric reports on dissidents, and official police reports about searches. The precedent for this was the publication of a White Book comprised by Aleksander Ginzburg on the trial of writers Yuli Daniel and Andrei Sinyavsky in 1966, which marked a return to the politicised public trials of the Stalin era and was a karotic moment in a return to political repression in the Soviet Union after the so-called Khrushchev Thaw. As was common with *samizdat*, the text was published widely throughout the West, including in an English-language translation entitled *On Trial: The Case of Sinyavsky and Daniel* (1967). The book contained transcripts of the court proceedings of the trial as well as letters directed to the authorities protesting about the verdict of the case, and press statements.

The importance of these trial reports relied on the detailed transcriptions of official court proceedings and the proclaimed authenticity of the text. As Feldbrugge writes:

Since [...] February 1966, it has been the practice among Soviet dissidents to prepare *verbatim* reports (as far as possible) immediately after the trial by comparing notes (usually made surreptitiously) and relying on the memory of several observers. An impressive number of reports has been compiled in this way, providing not only a vivid account of the confrontation between the Soviet regime and its dissident citizens, but also rare information about the actual operation of the Soviet legal system. In many cases the final words spoken by the accused have been incorporated in the trial reports, but a number of speeches from the dock also circulate separately and for this reason have been included in this group of documents.³²

The *samizdat* trial transcriptions are concerned with capturing the authenticity and verisimilitude of the event (often in a courtroom setting) in a society where factual evidence is often spun into propaganda and to coerce acquiescence towards the regime. Soviet *samizdat* and the documentary productions staged by Teatr.doc are

³² Feldbrugge (1975) 10.

cognate in their use of documentation and oral testimony to articulate a concern about the fictionalisation of justice and history under subsequent repressive regimes. Additionally, Teatr.doc continues the do-it-yourself aesthetics of *samizdat*, operating in small buildings not traditionally used as theatrical spaces, and without state funding. The literary nature of *samizdat*, however, meant that it was a mode of dissent widely produced and consumed in private, while the harsh penalties for spreading taboo texts restricted readership to a small number of accordant intelligentsia.³³ Documentary theatre in Russia, as I will further explore in this chapter, allows for a more direct form of dissent and protest towards the Putin administration due to its position of operating in a public and civic forum, which encourages debate and direct action. If *samizdat* made available censored documents and the testimony of Soviet dissent, Teatr.doc asks its audience, and by extension Russian society, to specifically consider how they themselves can become active accomplices in the opposition to Putin.

In this section I have set out the contexts in which verbatim theatre developed in Russia in the early twenty-first century. As well as tracing the lineage of verbatim theatre in Russia to both global theatre practices and Russian documentary traditions, I have investigated the rise of documentary theatre in the wider context of Russian opposition and dissent during the Soviet era. While the influence of Russia's own theatrical history and the interventions by the Royal Court are important legacies that must be acknowledged, I want to suggest that there is also a historical precedent for the use of documentary forms during periods of heightened political repression in Russia. The rise of documentary theatre and verbatim practices by playwrights cannot be viewed in isolation from the political context of Putinism. Like *samizdat* texts in the era of stagnation, documentary theatre has burgeoned during a period when the spectre of Stalinist manipulation of trials has been raised and led to scepticism about the impartiality of the Russian judicial system. I will now consider these issues in relation to the case studies for this chapter, *The Bolotnaya Square Case* and *One Hour Eighteen Minutes*.

Introducing the Plays

Putin's manipulation of the Russian legal system has established a new discourse

³³ Lovell (2000) 109.

focused on the status of justice in Russia, and heightened anxieties around testimony and verisimilitude. Two verbatim plays created by Teatr.doc, *The Bolotnaya Square Case* and *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* analogously highlight these concerns and raise questions about the role the general public plays in its strengthening of the regime through passivity and apathy. Furthermore, both plays challenge pre-conceived notions of Russian documentary theatre and demonstrate how the practice has evolved during Putin's presidency.

These two plays are significant both for their similarities and differences. While they focus on perceived acts of political and judicial repression by the state, their approach and style are divergent. Additionally, the writers of the two plays, Polina Borodina and Elena Gremina, have contrasting backgrounds and represent two distinctive generations of Russian playwrights. Gremina was born in central Moscow in 1957 into a literary family of successful writers. Her father, Anatoly Grebnev, and her older brother, Alexander Mindadze were two of the most renowned and respected screenwriters in Russia during the twentieth century. After graduating from the Gorky Literary Institute she made the decision to write under the pseudonym of Gremina in order to distance herself from her father's success in the industry.³⁴ Her first major production, *The Myth of Svetlana* (1984), performed at the Leningrad Theatre for Young Spectators, gained critical praise but was, however, subject to official state censorship. Over the next ten years Gremina wrote four more plays that were performed in Moscow with varying degrees of success. Her breakthrough came when the Moscow Arts Centre produced *Behind the Mirror* in 1994. The play starred opera singer Galina Vishnevskaya, whose fame brought an unexpected level of publicity to the production. *Behind the Mirror* achieved unprecedented levels of success for a new writing piece in post-Soviet Russia, and performances regularly sold out. Further success came with the production of *The Sakhalin Wife* (1996) at the House Actors Theatre, which commentators later highlighted as a turning point in attitudes towards new writing in Russia.³⁵ After the establishment of Teatr.doc, Gremina stepped back from writing to help promote and produce the next generation of Russian playwrights. Sasha Dugdale of the British Council in Moscow, who worked with Gremina on the organisation of the New Drama Festival from 2002 to

³⁴ The institute is located at 25 Tverskoy Boulevard, less than a five-minute walk from the site of the original Teatr.doc.

³⁵ Freedman (2004) 69.

2008, credits her as being responsible for the success of the contemporary new writing movement through her eye for talent and tireless work in securing funding and revenue for new productions.³⁶

In contrast, Borodina lives in the city of Ekaterinburg, east of Moscow in the Urals. Born in 1990, she is a graduate of Nikolai Koliada's playwriting course at the Ekaterinburg State Theatre Institute. Borodina's training ties her to the genealogy of New Drama and post-Soviet playwriting: Koliada emerged as a forbearer of New Drama in the 1990s and his school claims Oleg Bogaev and Vasily Sigarev among its alumni. Before writing the *The Bolotnaya Square Case*, Borodina's work had been staged at Teatr.doc as part of the Liubimovka New Writing Festival in 2014. In that year she co-wrote the play *SashBash* with contemporary and fellow Ekaterinburg resident Yuroslava Pulinovich about the life of the cult Soviet rock poet Alexander Bashlachev. Borodina's involvement in *The Bolotnaya Square Case* demonstrates the enduring legacy of documentary theatre in Russia, as it has been continued by a new generation of young playwrights looking to utilise the form to challenge the pro-Putin discourse disseminated by the state media.

Although both plays are described as documentary productions, the methods of research and reliance on verbatim testimony vary between the two plays. Research for *The Bolotnaya Square Case* had begun almost a year before the première, and Borodina spent months gathering material and testimony from family members of those arrested. This was subsequently edited and became the central body of the performance text. In contrast, *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* foregrounds the artistic licence taken by Russian playwrights when creating documentary theatre, substantiating Ugarov's claim that Teatr.doc does not follow a 'strict' practice of verbatim theatre.³⁷ The majority of the text is not verbatim material, but is instead sourced from a plethora of sources and documents including the diaries and letters of Sergei Magnitsky, interviews with Magnitsky's family members, internet blogs and newspapers articles from *Novaya Gazeta* and *Novoye Vremia*.³⁸ The documentary material drawn upon by the playwrights takes the form of both verbatim testimony and official legal documents, but additionally both productions stage physical documents, and encourage the audience to be active producers of documentation

³⁶ Dugdale (2009) 17

³⁷ Ugarov (2012).

³⁸ Gremina (2014) 443. The show's programme credits Yekaterina Bondarenko, Anatasia Patlay, and Zosya Rodkevich with the collection of the documentary material for the play.

themselves. In doing so, these two plays are significant examples of how theatre-makers in Russia have used documentary methods to challenge Putinism.

The Bolotnaya Square Case

The Bolotnaya Square Case is a collaboration between playwright Polina Borodina and director Elena Gremina. It consists of a dramatisation of a series of interviews conducted with the friends and relatives of those arrested and subsequently detained and tried for their involvement in the protests of 6 May 2012. The highly emotive material is presented sequentially starting with an account of the Moscow protests, through descriptions of the arrests, leading to an examination of how family bonds are both tested and maintained by the protestors' incarceration. The play opened at Teatr.doc's new venue on Spartakovskaya Ulitsa in the Baumanskaya region in Moscow on 6 May 2015, with the date of the production's Moscow première marking the third anniversary of the March of the Millions demonstration that eventuated on the eve of Putin's inauguration as president in 2012. Although the staging at Teatr.doc was billed as the official première of *The Bolotnaya Square Case*, the piece had previously been staged under the auspices of the Belarus Free Theatre as a rehearsed reading in front of a small audience in Minsk on 21 March 2015.

Throughout the creative process, a strong link was maintained with the family members of those tried in the Bolotnaya Square Case. Those who were interviewed have subsequently been invited to attend the performances at Teatr.doc, and many were present at the official opening of the show. The four cast members, Varvara Faer, Marina Boiko, Konstantin Kozhevnikov and Anastasia Patlai, had participated in the demonstrations and rallies that proliferated across Moscow and the rest of the country in 2011 and 2012, and during the investigation and trials of the Bolotnaya protestors, members of the Teatr.doc's administrative and creative team further participated in demonstrations against the activists' detainment. In a recent interview Borodina notes the impact that researching the play had on her, claiming 'the stories are so heavy and you perceive them so closely that they have a psychological effect on you and change your emotional state.'³⁹

The show is undoubtedly one of the most politically charged and polarising productions currently running in any theatre's repertoire in Russia, and staging the

³⁹ Borodina (2015b).

play resulted in an unprecedented show of combativeness and intimidation against Teatr.doc by the Moscow authorities. On the eve of the première, members of the Moscow city police arrived unannounced at Teatr.doc. In a ritual similar to when the company was evicted from its original space in December 2014, the premises were thoroughly searched, disrupting the dress rehearsal. On her *Facebook* page, director Elena Gremina posted an ominous photo of Moscow police officers sitting in the theatre watching the rehearsals. The following evening a squad of police officers stood guard outside the theatre prior to and after the performance. The next day, however, a syndicate of police returned to interrogate the staff at Teatr.doc about the production in a further display of force. If the authorities had hoped to dissuade audience members from attending through coercion, they failed. Despite the heavy police presence at the theatre and the threat of a raid on the building during the performance that would result in the detainment of audience members (as there had been on 30 December 2014), there was an overwhelming demand for tickets during the play's short opening run. Performances of the play were full beyond capacity each night, with audience members squeezed into every available space and even on the front of the stage. The continuing popularity of *The Bolotnaya Square Case* demonstrates a considerable desire of theatregoers in Russia to experience a public moment of shared collectivism. As Svetlana Orlova wrote in her review of the première, 'the performance was almost a social action group psychotherapy'.⁴⁰ Echoing Borodina's assertion that the stories had a 'psychological impact' on her, Orlova suggests that the play acts as conduit for spectators to come to terms with the collective trauma of the growing oppression of the Putin regime and the shadow being cast over Russian civil society by Putinism in the 2010s. Orlova's focus on 'social action' further indicates Teatr.doc's importance as a public space where both artists and audience members engage in civic activity that has been restricted and denied by the government. As we shall see, the social action and 'psychotherapy' in *The Bolotnaya Square Case* takes on a very real precedent in the after-show discussions.

Three quarters of sadness

By the time I attended a production of *The Bolotnaya Square Case* at Teatr.doc's newest building on Maly Kazyonny Lane near Kurskaya metro station on 15

⁴⁰ Orlova (2015).

November 2015, much of the initial posturing by the authorities had died down and, from my own perspective, the tumult and tense atmosphere reported during the play's initial run in the Teatr.doc repertoire in May had abated. I could not see any members of the Moscow police force present as they were during the play's initial performances, although, as reports also claimed members of the plain-clothed police branch were in attendance during the first three performances in May I cannot completely validate the statement that no government officials were in attendance at the performance.

As the performance begins, the audience is confronted by the partisan slogan 'Freedom for the defendants in the Bolotnaya Case!' boldly projected onto the bare brick walls at the back of the stage. The banner then fades and is replaced with a projection of an extract from the documentary film *Winter, Go Away! (Zima, Ukhdi!*, 2012), which chronicled the protest movement on the eve of the 2012 presidential election. Co-produced by Ugarov and directed by graduates of his School of Documentary Film and Documentary Theatre, the film had been banned at the last minute at the 'KinZA' film festival in Tyumen with Ugarov blaming Putin's United Russia Party for the decision.⁴¹ The projection acts as a counterpoint to the selective media images of the protests, and contrasts with the hyperbole of *The Anatomy of Protest*. Furthermore, the film raises the premise of *samizdat* and asks the audience to consider the significance that censoring documents and artefacts can have on public opinion, while highlighting the importance of continuing an alternative narration and documentation of events even when officials try to silence them.

Unlike many of Teatr.doc's previous documentary plays, which de-emphasised set dressing and props and are played out within the theatre's empty black box space, *The Bolotnaya Square Case* made more emphatic use of scenery. The stage is set to recall a simplistic domestic environment. In the centre of the stage is a desk, on which is positioned a warmly glowing desk light, and large pile of sweets in colourful wrapping. Down stage, two hammocks are strung up across the performance space. The hammocks further emphasise the relaxed domesticity of the setting, but also add darker implications to the *mise-en-scène*. The performers glance through them when performing their lines and the shadows cast on their faces appears to the audience as if they are peering through prison bars, or wire mesh. Furthermore, the

⁴¹ Ugarov (2012).

hammocks are strung up around the performance space to delineate and block off certain parts of the room, serving as a subtle reminder to the audience of how civic space in Moscow and Russia is slowly being encroached on, while avenues of dissent are blocked off by the Putin regime. The hammocks also generate a feeling of time that has been lost and slipped away. As the performers sit in them, we become increasingly aware of the time lost by the accused who must wait in prison for their trials, but also those on the outside who remain in emotional limbo over the fate of their loved ones.

The characters in the piece are not named, and are never specifically linked with any of the defendants in the Bolotnaya Affair. Instead, they are referred to simply by their relation to the accused, for example ‘mother’, ‘grandfather’, and ‘friend’. As John Freedman summarises in his review of the play for the *Moscow Times* ‘it’s not “who” here that counts, it’s “what.”’⁴² The opening lines of the play, spoken by a fellow student of one of the accused, further sets out an important premise and focal point of the production:

There is a saying that when a person goes on the road they take a quarter of sadness, and three-quarters remain with those who stay behind, because they are the ones who are left waiting.⁴³

By focusing on the families of those who were arrested after the March of the Millions, *The Bolotnaya Square Case* renders what was a very public act of protest, reported and broadcast on a global scale, into a domestic setting. Borodina attests to the importance of the play ‘talk[ing] about the case, about the fate of the children not through themselves and their direct speech, but through stories told by their loved ones’.⁴⁴ Borodina asserts that this methodological decision in her approach made the play ‘emotional and warmer, while on the other hand allowed people to understand the process of the case and how such a random sample and disparate selection of society suddenly found themselves connected to this disaster’.⁴⁵ Borodina’s comments also point to how *The Bolotnaya Square Case* departs from a specific facet of Russian documentary theatre. As Beumers and Lipovetsky observe, ‘all the heroes

⁴² Freedman (2015).

⁴³ Borodina (2015a) 2.

⁴⁴ Borodina (2015b).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

of doc-theatre are interesting, because they represent a certain social group'.⁴⁶ In *The Bolotnaya Square Case*, a diverse stratum of Russian society, age, and background provide the material that Borodina uses to construct the play. This decision highlights a specific unease that the Bolotnaya Affair was a watershed moment in Russian politics that marked a turning point in the Kremlin's stance towards opposition activists. Commenting on the seemingly arbitrary prosecution of the Bolotnaya protestors by the state, Khodorkovsky echoes Borodina's comments:

There is a reason why close to 30 people have been plucked out of the crowd and thrown onto the defendants' bench in the 'Bolotnaya case'. In this lies the cruel and cynical message of those in power: it makes no difference who you are – an engineer, a student, a pensioner, an opposition activist, a theoretical physicist, a manager, a mathematician, a commercial director, a scholar, or a homeless person. If you came out to a sanctioned rally – we're going to send you to jail.⁴⁷

In other words, the Kremlin delivered a politicised edict with the Bolotnaya Square Case, that any act of protest or sympathetic solidarity with the opposition would no longer be tolerated. It was a clear message that the veneer of democracy that Putinism had operated under in the 2000s had been discarded and that modern Russia is now a country ruled by means of fear and oppression. By focusing on the families of the accused the play further demonstrates the heterogeneity of those who felt provoked to provide testimony and were affected by the trial. For many of the 6 May prisoners who found their lives ripped apart by their prison sentences, these family members and close friends were all they had left.

Much of the testimony in the play is seemingly mundane, focusing on aspects of family life that have been torn apart by the trial and imprisonment of the demonstrators. There is testimony from a father who describes his affectionate rivalry with his son over their respective love of local football teams, Spartak Moscow and CSKA Moscow. There is a long and poignant monologue delivered by the wife of another Bolotnaya protestor who recalls a holiday in Spain with her husband where he won her a stuffed toy at an amusement arcade. The play depicts the family members

⁴⁶ Beumers and Lipovetsky (2009) 227.

⁴⁷ Khodorkovsky (2013).

as detached from the rhetoric of the protest movement, and this is vocalised by the lines spoken by a mother who claims that, before the trial, she had no idea what ‘*Dozhd*’ or ‘*Twitter*’ were in reference to the independent news organisation *Dozhd* [Rain] that promotes the opposition movement, and social media application Twitter that was widely used by the young activists to mobilise the protests of 6 May.⁴⁸ Despite the seemingly prosaic nature of the play, my analysis suggests that Borodina’s editing process and construction of the script deliberately addresses contemporary concerns and debates surrounding Putinism and the Russian legal system.

‘Fictitious Legalism’ and the *The Bolotnaya Square Case*

As the friends and family members begin to recount their memories, the performers move around the set. One lies on a hammock, another sits at the desk and starts to unwrap the sweets, re-enacting a speech delivered later in the play that all sweets delivered to prisoners must first be unwrapped. The story of the defendants begins *in medias res*, with a detailed description of the events of 6 May 2012, in the form of a monologue spoken by a friend of one of the prisoners who also attended the protests:

120000 people.⁴⁹ Summer, nice weather, a lot of people with kids and balloons. Really cool! Apparently there were 80000 yesterday, 120000 today, and then tomorrow a million will come and all will be well in the country [...] Then, suddenly mothers with their children are running to the Kremlin. And then we went to the bridge and saw the car, and I realised that it was a provocation [...] And then, when it’s all beginning to fall apart, that was when the OMON [riot police] ran it, and when they started to beat people around... And later I found out that everyone had been taken away.⁵⁰

The actor performing these lines speaks them in an emotionless, matter-of-fact way, although as the speech continues the sentences start to lose shape, revealing the trauma of recalling the event. The friend’s description of the rhapsodic atmosphere amongst the demonstrators contrasts with their bleak description of how what was

⁴⁸ Borodina (2015a) 22.

⁴⁹ The figure given here is equivocal and contrasts with the number present at the protest given by both Russian and Western press as 20000.

⁵⁰ Borodina (2015a) 2-3.

conceived as a peaceful protest degenerated into violence. The monologue diverges from the reports that the protestors initiated the violence. By doing so, it sets the scene for the remainder of the play, highlighting the Putin administration's 'fictitious legalism' while bringing into question the methods by which evidence is constructed and the politicisation of justice by the Kremlin.

'Governments spin the facts in order to tell stories', writes Carol Martin. 'Theatre spins them right back in order to tell different stories.'⁵¹ The temptation for the creators of the play could easily have been to react to the propaganda depicted on state television on the same level, 'spinning' the events of the 6 May protests as a simple act of repression against civil liberties by the state. *The Bolotnaya Square Case*, however, does not simply 'spin the facts', but instead deconstructs the system that has facilitated the manipulation of justice, exposing, and contesting these fictions of official history. In this way, the play encourages the audience to consider their own role as more than just passive witnesses to these acts of injustice.

As the play develops and the family members recount their stories, the corrupt nature of the Russian legal system and its deployment against the Bolotnaya defendants is systematically exposed. In particular, the nature of how evidence is manipulated and conscious effort employed to obscure the truth are examined in the production. As has been explored earlier in this chapter, there is an unease in contemporary Russia about the credibility of evidence used to obtain convictions and a general scepticism about the impartiality of trials against opposition activists. In one particular scene of *The Bolotnaya Square Case*, the father of one of the accused recalls how, during the trial of his son, a police officer repeatedly provided evidence against him. The police officer claimed that the son had injured him in an unprovoked attack during the demonstration. The father, however, then reveals that, when pushed by the defence lawyer to substantiate his claims, the officer was unable to do so. Ruefully, the father recounts how 'this evidence is not in the trial record, they do not have to publish it'.⁵² In another monologue spoken by the mother of another of the accused, a similar point is made. She describes how her son was subject to police brutality after his arrest, and beaten over the head repeatedly. The implication is that the police deliberately aimed their strikes towards the head because the injuries are less obvious than if inflicted on other parts of the body. She then recalls how

⁵¹ Martin (2006) 14.

⁵² Borodina (2015a) 6.

He was taken in a convoy. There is no camera at all, nothing. Again he hit him on the head. He lost consciousness. And on the second day he was sick. I went to the infirmary, and it turns out he was told that it was a concussion, but it is not recorded anywhere. They gave him some pills and that's it.⁵³

Borodina's use of testimony articulates a particular fixation with the construction of evidence and the control of documentation by the Putin regime. The literal covering-up of evidence by the police in beating suspects over the head where the physical trauma is easier to conceal highlights the importance of the act of both documenting and sharing acts of oppression for fear they will be whitewashed from history by the regime. Like the precedent set by *samizdat* literature, documentary theatre is used as a method of recording these denials of truth, and vocalises the importance of creating counter narratives that attempt to dispel the fabrication of official testimony and documents.

The historical precedent for this form of dissent becomes more apparent as the performance continues. By including a wide cross section of Russian society in the interviews Borodina conducted for *The Bolotnaya Square Case*, the audience are able to hear differing analysis and accounts of the judicial process of the case. Of particular significance is the testimony of two grandparents about the arrests of the suspects in the months that preceded the protests. The emotive decision by Borodina to use the account of two members of this specific generation to describe the process of the mass arrests that followed the protests is potent and highly political. The grandmother and grandfather reveal their shock in describing how, without warning, their home was stormed by police who searched their premises aggressively before handcuffing their grandson and arresting him. It is clear that, by including the description of the arrests as told by part of a generation who lived through the Stalin era, Borodina is deliberately recalls the imagery of the Great Terror in the description of the nocturnal arrests of the Bolotnaya Square protestors. This invocation is marked by the grandmother's specific reference to the most intense period of Stalin's purges, the Yezhovshchina: 'God! What is this? 1937?'⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid. 8.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 4.

As has been noted above, the stifling of free speech has been a trigger for independent Russian commentators to look back to the Stalin era to draw certain comparisons and similarities. In his vital and evocative study of Stalinism's impact on the population of the Soviet Union, *The Whisperers: Private Lives in Stalin's Russia*, historian Orlando Figes reveals how the private memory of the Great Terror survived the Cold War through the oral transmission of stories and experiences between family members.⁵⁵ By calling attention to the grandparents' testimony, Borodina additionally reflects on this lineage and the importance of documentary theatre and the technique of verbatim as a means of continuing the oral transmission during periods of political uncertainty.

Throughout the play, the spectre of Stalinism remains constant. A similar comparison between the events of the Bolotnaya Square Case and the Great Terror is made when a second father recalls warning his son about the perils of challenging the government:

See the growth of all these protest movements, they all end [...] Read the *Children of Arbat*, it is very well written. There too, people did not do anything, but they were still arrested.⁵⁶

The Children of Arbat (1987) is an anti-Stalinist novel by Anatoly Rybakov that portrays the intensification of the repression that led to the purges of the 1930s. The novel depicts Stalin as a paranoid and malevolent ruler whose policies robbed a generation of young Soviets of their freedom. Returning to the context in which this play is considered, *The Bolotnaya Square Case* uses the material gathered by Borodina during her research to support a growing sentiment amongst opposition supporters and independent commentators that Putin's growing suppression of the protest movement and the manipulation of the legal system is uncannily reminiscent of the darkest moments of Soviet repression where dissidents were prosecuted and convicted in rigged show trials. The testimony provided by these two individuals additionally demonstrates, however, that such comparisons between the crack down on civic activism and the Great Terror is not necessarily confined to the pages of

⁵⁵ Figes (2008)

⁵⁶ Ibid. 22.

liberal broadsheet newspapers such as *Novaya Gazeta* and international observers, but has been vocalised in a wider context of Russian society.

After the Performance

As detailed above, the testimony included in *The Bolotnaya Square Case* raises serious questions that relate to the notions of justice in contemporary Russia and how evidence and verisimilitude are doctored by the Putin regime. The play also foregrounds concerns within Russian society that cases such as the prosecution of the Bolotnaya protestors mark a return to political repression not seen since the Soviet era. The heart of the play, however, is not simply an exposé of the effect of a corrupt legal system on those who challenge the regime, but a consideration of how the revivification of authoritarianism can be challenged to prevent a potential repeat of history.

This raises the question: in what tangible way does the production promote civic activity and challenge the social norms and discourses of Putinism? As the production concludes, the actors join together to sing an old anti-Tsarist revolutionary song from the 1870s called Break the Chains:

*On the dusty road the wagon rushes
Flanked by two policemen
Beat the shackles
Give me the will
I will teach you to love freedom
Young exile in a travelling cart
With hands tied
Beat the shackles
Give me the will
I will teach you to love freedom*

As the actors sing, they encourage the audience to join in with the final stanza ‘*beat the shackles, give me the will, I will teach you to love freedom*’. The action of the audience and cast joining together to sing this revolutionary ode to freedom is a powerful moment of civic engagement encouraged by Teatr.doc. It supports my argument that *The Bolotnaya Square Case* is not simply a documentation of Putin’s

repression of 28 Russian citizens who protested against him, but is instead a performance that transforms Teatr.doc into a public forum where people can actively resist the official narratives of the state and their promotion of discordance between the Bolotnaya protestors and the rest of the population. Moreover, this act of solidarity does not end as the actors take their curtain call. If the performance aimed to give voice to the families personally affected by the Bolotnaya Square case, then the post-show activities allow the audience to document and express their own feelings and emotions surrounding the affair. In an act of support and solidarity the audience members are provided with pens and paper and encouraged to write letters to the demonstrators still held in prison, which Teatr.doc posts to them. Emboldening the audience to engage in their own act of documentation to bring ‘freedom for the defendants in the Bolotnaya Case’ reflects on Bukovsky’s definition that the creation and documentation of *samizdat* texts was a key facet of protest and civic activism in the Soviet Union. It further brings to the attention of the audience that if justice cannot be achieved in the courtroom, then there is a responsibility for civic activity and theatre to attempt to undermine the social and political institutions that facilitate the manipulation of the legal system. The act of letter writing establishes a tangible bond of solidarity between the audience and the Bolotnaya Square protestors. By acting as a site of communal engagement and activism, Teatr.doc and *The Bolotnaya Square Case* calls upon the legacy of *samizdat* to emphasise the importance of documentation as a means to challenge Russia’s ‘fictitious legalism’.

As well as providing the opportunity for written expression and communication with the Bolotnaya protestors, each performance is also followed by a post-show discussion between audience members and the creative team. In a society where the government relies on biased news reporting and the oppression of those who speak out against Putin as tools to achieve an ataractic society these debates are an important part of contesting the politically suffocating environment of contemporary Russia. The discussions demonstrate how *The Bolotnaya Square Case* intervenes in the public sphere, operating as a meeting place not only to hear stories that contest the official narrative and history of Putinism, but also as an event that challenges the passivity of the audience by encouraging them to debate and consider their own role in responding to the injustices of the Putin regime. In 2016, the post-show discussions for *The Bolotnaya Square Case* took an even more interesting turn. Teatr.doc took the decision to invite the police officers who had been present during

the rallies of 6 May to the performances and to participate in the after-show discussions. One of the few members of the police to commit to the theatre's offer was a senior police major and criminal investigator Ludmila Makeeva, who had been involved in the prosecution of the Bolotnaya protestors. The question and answer session is led by the cast and director Gremina, although audience members are also encouraged to participate in the cross-examination. Unlike a typical theatre production that is performed in reverential silence, in the video footage I have watched, Makeeva is subjected to interjections and sarcastic murmurings from the audience. By inviting Makeeva to take part in these discussions, the performance becomes an extension of the Bolotnaya Square Case trial, and provided the audience with an opportunity to gain further insight into why this unprecedented mass prosecution occurred in an attempt to re-assess and further pursue justice for the 28 protestors.

Makeeva's answers reveal another side of the debate. In a question and answers session after a performance of *The Bolotnaya Square Case* in June 2016 Makeeva commented that:

You know perfectly well that we are working on your behalf. We have some information that maybe you do not have access to, that is not in our interest to share [...] This is a fine performance on a political matter [but] it is the emotional component that excites you [...] you have no answer [for how to improve the system].⁵⁷

Although Makeeva's answer contrasts with the sentiment of the production, I suggest that her comment that Teatr.doc has no answers is incorrect. By inviting a wider dialogue between the audience and the police implicit in the mass arrests of 6 May 2012 *The Bolotnaya Square Case* widens the discourse about the Russian judicial system, receding the schism in Russian society that the Putin administration has aimed to widen. Although some audience members, such as Gaskarnova, viewed the sympathetic portrayal of the protestors and their families as a story that needed to be heard above the echo-chamber of state propaganda, others saw it as unrealistic and idealist, failing to take into consideration the pressures faced by the authorities

⁵⁷ Post-show discussion at Teatr.doc, on 9 June 2016. Details shared with me by Elena Gremina.

working on the case. Regardless of these differences, the play has become a unique opportunity to discuss such controversial issues in a public forum, where both protestors and police feel comfortable to debate the process. This itself is a form of dissent against Putin, by creating further narrative about justice while also challenging the dangerous divide in Russian society.

In his introduction to *The Whisperers*, Figes avers that ‘a silent and conformist population is one lasting consequence of Stalin’s regime’.⁵⁸ As Russian commentators speak of a return to Soviet repression, and the Russian population loses its faith in the judicial system’s ability to serve them fairly, documentary theatre that records oral lore takes on further importance. *The Bolotnaya Square Case* is not simply a documentation of this repression but a demonstration of the importance of resisting the regime’s attempt to promote conformity and passivity by encouraging others to speak up, enlivening and widening the debate. The determination of Borodina to document these accounts points to the enduring importance of recording and documenting personal narratives as a testimony of Russia’s endurance in the face of oppression.

One Hour Eighteen Minutes

While *The Bolotnaya Square Case* explored the ideas of Putin’s ‘fictitious legalism’, Gremina’s play *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* takes this exploration of the Russian judicial system even further, interrogating the final hours of corporate lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who died in Moscow’s Butyrka prison in November 2009. The silencing of information on Magnitsky’s death meant that few witnesses were willing to come forward and provide testimony. As a result, the documentation utilised by Gremina differs from *The Bolotnaya Square Case*, relying on media reports and materials provided by Magnitsky’s family.

While working for the UK-based hedge fund Hermitage Capital Management, Magnitsky exposed £150 million worth of tax fraud in Russia involving senior police officers, members of the judiciary, bankers, and the Russian mafia. Refusing to take asylum abroad, Magnitsky chose to stay in Moscow where he was subsequently arrested on 24 November 2008, and charged with instigating the fraud himself. A deep irony of Magnitsky’s arrest is that he had previously named one of the senior

⁵⁸ Figes (2008) xxxi.

police investigators in charge of his detainment as a prime facilitator of the corruption he exposed. Although never officially charged, Magnitsky was held for eleven months in pre-trial detention and put under immense pressure to confess to the accusations against him. In a series of letters and diaries, Magnitsky recorded the treatment he received in prison, and the harsh conditions he was subjected to in order to hasten his admission of guilt. In the summer of 2009, Magnitsky became seriously ill, and despite being scheduled for an operation was transferred to the squalid Butyrka prison in the Tverskoy district of central Moscow. Finally, just eight days before the Russian legal limit of one-year's detention without trial, Magnitsky's health became critical and he was transferred to Matrosskaya Tishina detention center for emergency hospitalisation. When he arrived, he was instead locked in a solitary cell and allegedly handcuffed and beaten. When civilian doctors finally arrived to treat Magnitsky, the prison authorities refused them entry to his cell for a further seventy-eight minutes, during which time Magnitsky died. The play's title is a reference to the precise amount of time Magnitsky took to die in his cell as medical help was denied to him. In 2013, Magnitsky was posthumously tried by the state and found guilty of tax fraud. William Browder, the American CEO of Hermitage Capital Management who was also tried and sentenced *in absentia*, provocatively described the verdict against Magnitsky as the 'most shameful moment since Stalin'.⁵⁹ Despite the fact that Magnitsky's family have urged a murder investigation to be opened, the only official charged with responsibility of his death, Dr Dmitry Kratov, was acquitted in December 2012 after a judge ruled there was insufficient evidence against him.⁶⁰

One Hour Eighteen Minutes seeks to provide justice for Magnitsky where the state failed to do so. Relying on the sourcing of official documents, including Valery Borshev's report for the Moscow Public Oversight Commission, journalistic coverage of the case, and interviews, Gremina constructs a theatrical trial of the key protagonists in an attempt to establish a *corpus delicti* for Magnitsky's death in Matrosskaya Tishina prison in November 2009. As has been discussed above, there is a theatrical paradigm for courtroom settings in the tribunal productions of the Tricycle Theatre and the German documentary plays of the 1960s. Furthermore, in her analysis of *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* Flynn draws comparisons between the play's theatrical use of a courtroom setting and the mock trials of the early Soviet era,

⁵⁹ Elder (2013).

⁶⁰ See Elder (2012).

arguing that ‘by setting their performance of justice in a courtroom the creators of *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* call upon the country’s unusually intimate, and occasionally lethal, association between judicial and theatrical practice.’⁶¹ Unlike tribunal theatre, however, *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* does not draw upon actual legal testimony as to date no inquiry into the death of Magnitsky has occurred. Instead, as the producers of the play make it clear in their programme notes that ‘*this performance presents a trial that never happened. A trial that – if justice is served – must eventually take place*’.⁶² *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* is unique in the canon of Russian documentary plays due to Gremina’s brave and unflinching decision to name the participants responsible for the death of Magnitsky. In the programme, director Mikhail Ugarov makes a specific invitation to those depicted in the play to come to Teatr.doc and watch the performance, although this offer has not been accepted.⁶³

The play was first performed at Teatr.doc in June 2010, and was co-directed by Ugarov and Talgat Batalov (Batalov also performed in the production): the production remains in Teatr.doc’s current repertoire, although in recent years it has only been performed sporadically. The play was expanded in 2012 to include a series of extra scenes after new witnesses came forward to provide further evidence, and in November 2015 the play was once again resurrected at Teatr.doc’s new space to commemorate the six-year anniversary of Magnitsky’s death. Unsurprisingly, given the global coverage of Magnitsky’s death, the production received wide attention abroad and was staged internationally in a number of foreign language translations. In November 2011 a production was staged at Amnesty International’s headquarters in London by Noah Birksted-Breen’s Sputnik company, and the extended version of the play then ran at the New Diorama Theatre in London the follow year.

Despite the play’s structure resembling trial proceedings, the minimalistic nature of the performance does not adhere to Paget’s delineation of tribunal theatre’s ‘authentic’ staging.⁶⁴ The actors, dressed in their own street clothes, speak out to the audience as if addressing an invisible interrogator, making no claim to naturalism. By putting the focus on the words spoken the audience are not allowed to feel distanced from the events and the fact that a man was allowed to die, alone and in agony in his prison cell. The original play was divided into nine scenes, the first seven of which

⁶¹ Flynn (2014) 312.

⁶² Gremina (2014) 443.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Paget (2009) 234.

are monologues given by individuals who either knew Magnitsky, or were connected to or witnesses of his death.

The play begins as one of the seated actors addresses the audience. The performer draws their attention to a document they have been handed as they entered the performance space, asking them to read the first item listed on the pamphlet. In total there are nine items, echoing the number of scenes in the play. Each item names a real-life individual linked to Magnitsky's death, and documents their relationship to the deceased. During the production, the protagonists are individually called upon from this document to take the stand one by one to provide their testimony seriatim. The documentation of this information in a physical booklet shared with the audience recalls trial procedures, but furthermore it underscores an endemic cultural anxiety about the veracity of official legal testimony in Putin's Russia. Recalling Bukovsky's appraisal of *samizdat* as 'write myself, edit myself, censor myself, publish myself, distribute myself', Teatr.doc have been forced by the paucity of official evidence detailing the facts of the Magnitsky affair to produce and disseminate their own documentation amongst their audience for posterity.⁶⁵ As the performance continues, it becomes evident that this physical document disseminated among the audience details the events of Magnitsky's death that the defendants' oral testimony cannot.

Although *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* is a dramatic re-imagining of a trial that never actually held for Magnitsky, the use of documentary material is an important facet of the play, most notably in the form of Magnitsky's prison diaries and the letters he wrote from prison. Gremina's use of these documents is analogous to the *samizdat* legal texts in that they reveal a particular component of the Magnitsky affair that was not part of the official body of documents that detail his arrest and imprisonment. Magnitsky's correspondence reveals a different perspective to the official state-sanctioned narrative of his imprisonment. Throughout the duration of the performance, a projection of Magnitsky's final letter written from prison is illuminated on the black wall at the back of the stage. In scrawled Russian cursive Magnitsky recalls a visit to the prison library and reveals a longing to re-read Shakespeare on his release. The diurnal tone of the letter is poignant and does not hint at the events that followed. By foregrounding a physical piece of documentation from Magnitsky's final days, the letter acts as an ever present document, reminding the

⁶⁵ Bukovsky (1978) 115.

audience that whatever testimony they hear spoken on stage by the officials responsible for Magnitsky's mistreatment - either repudiating the events or defaming Magnitsky's character - the letter stands as irrefutable proof of the government's attempt to fictionalise reality and manipulate the facts. In one scene, the investigator into Magnitsky's prosecution, Oleg Silchenko, reads out further extracts from Magnitsky's letters and, as he does so, he pauses to provide his own contemptuous commentary on Magnitsky's plight. In this way, the play further explores the disdain the authorities held even for Magnitsky's basic requests for care:

Forty fucking pages! Jesus Christ – he was preparing his case for the EU's fucking Court of Human Rights! He actually thought he'd see daylight again [...] Look at this: Ten more complaints. What, is he crazy? [...] "Toilets in cell are simply holes in the floor, with no separation between the toilet facility and the cell itself" [...] Is he fucking with us? "The toilet was not partitioned" [...] Seriously, he is really trying to fuck with us.⁶⁶

As the defendants continue to make their plea to the audience, a recurring theme begins to appear. In their argument for their mitigation, they repeatedly point to the obfuscated nature and fluidity of the notion of justice in modern Russia. Furthermore, despite the fact the witnesses claim to uphold justice in Russia, their own testimony appears to subsequently undermine this. Oleg Silchenko, who was responsible for the conditions of Magnitsky's imprisonment and repeatedly denied him access to doctors, highlights this in his assessment of the venal nature of the prison system Magnitsky was exposed to:

They could have done something. I mean, everything has a price. Even boiling water. [...] You want hot water in the cell? You want newspapers? TV? Cell phones? You want to bang your wife one night in the cell? They'll let her in... And they'll hand over a SIM card too. Cell phones, three-course meals... Whatever you want. For a price.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Gremina (2014) 450-1.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 448-9.

Silchenko's speech demonstrates the arbitrary and inconsistent nature of justice under Putinism. Justice, and even basic human rights, have now become a commodity depending on your status in modern Russia. As the Putin regime seeks to create a fictitious but official narrative of justice, so the system is open to abuse and manipulation by the very people who profess to serve it. In Teatr.doc's imagined trial everything has a price, from a cup of hot water to the dismissal of a case.

In *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* though, the perversion of justice is not simply seen in the context of Magnitsky's case. Gremina does not attempt to lionize Magnitsky or martyr him as a hero who challenged the regime. In the next scene, Dr Alexandra Gauss, a medical doctor at the Matrosskaya Tishina prison where Magnitsky died, explains how she refused him medical treatment in the final hours of his life:

The suspect was complaining about intense pain. This might have been true, it might not have. Prisoners always lie – they try to make their temperatures go up; they fake having seizures [...] The main thing is you never really show concern – otherwise, they can smell your fear and take advantage of you.⁶⁸

Dr Gauss reiterates this in the final section of her speech, when she concludes, 'I'm a doctor. And the duty of a licensed physician is to expose fakes'.⁶⁹ Gauss's comments contrast with the assertion made by Magnitsky's mother Natalia Magnitskaya in the opening monologue, where she suggests that her son could not trust or rely on the prison medical staff to deliver the drugs he needed for his condition.

Returning to the testimony of Silchenko, the investigator, he states that Magnitsky was implicitly guilty through his legal representation of businessmen who were making money through questionable means. The play thus presents a vicious circle of mistrust where those who had Magnitsky entrusted to their care have lost faith in the authority of the judicial system, and by implication have lost faith in those they have sworn to protect. Like Silchenko who claims that Magnitsky's mistreatment was not his responsibility and was due to his own failure to twist the system, the doctor also displays a view of Russian civic society that has assiduously been dismantled by Putinism through a tactic of dividing the population with fear and

⁶⁸ Ibid. 452.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 454.

scepticism of the communities they live in. *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* presents a picture of contemporary Russia as a country that is ruled by mistrust, and where everyone is fearful. In his consideration of the Russian judicial system, White has opined that judges have been ‘subject to influence from the executive military, and security forces, particularly in high-profile and or politically sensitive cases’.⁷⁰ In other words, the manipulation of the judicial system is allied with the pervasive corruption of Russian society as a whole. *One Hour Eighteen Minutes*’ deconstruction of the deficiencies of the legal system and the state’s inability to provide justice for Magnitsky⁷¹ extends to a wider dialogue on anxieties that the state is dismantling the very fabric of Russian society itself, and is a symptom of Putinism’s ‘power vertical’. Analysing the documentary productions at Teatr.doc in the 2000s, Beumers and Lipovetsky write: ‘the question is not about society as a whole, but about a concrete social environment or subculture.’⁷² My analysis of *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* argues that its assailment of the failings of the Russian judicial system is precisely about ‘society as a whole’. In this chapter’s wider consideration of the phenomenon of documentary theatre in twenty-first century Russia, *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* demonstrates these plays are not part of a stagnant or fixed theatrical mode. In their examination of contemporary society and politics, documentary theatre-makers in Russia employ a malleable agglomeration of theatrical techniques and influences ranging from British verbatim, tribunal theatre, and the oppositional *samizdat* documents of the Soviet Union.

The Act of Witnessing.

Gremina’s weaving of documents and testimony is not simply an attempt to hold a mirror up to the venality and political divisiveness of the Putin regime. In addition, *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* challenges how the Kremlin is able to spin and inculcate its corrupt and divisive policies in Russian society. In the following two scenes, the audience is presented with evidence from two members of the public who were key witnesses to the final hours of Magnitsky’s life. The first of these is an unnamed woman who drove in the front of the ambulance that transported Magnitsky from one prison to another on his final day alive. The second is the testimony from a paramedic

⁷⁰ White (2011) 344.

⁷¹ For a further explanation of the ‘Power Vertical’ see the introduction to this thesis.

⁷² Beumers and Lipvetsky (2009) 215.

named Sasha who worked at the Matrosskaya Tishina prison where Magnitsky was detained. While the audience will perhaps not be shocked to hear senior ranking officials attempting to clear themselves of responsibilities in a high-profile case, it is these scenes that include the testimony of individuals with no apparent political motive that are the most telling.

In his book *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance* theatre scholar Patrick Duggan states: ‘Witnessing brings with it implications of responsibility and imperatives to testify, especially within the specifics of law, medicine and history narrative.’⁷³ ‘To be made witness’ Duggan argues:

places someone firmly in the first person; witnessing is the act of being present at the happening of an event. To bear witness, then, is the act of recounting that event to a present audience, to fulfil the role to testifier and articulate the event in some form, to perform it and give it space to become ‘real’ for an assembled crowd [...] To bear witness to the events is to take on the responsibility of imparting the action to others.⁷⁴

Like the previous defendants in the trial, Sasha the paramedic and the young woman in the ambulance abnegate any responsibility for Magnitsky’s death. Moreover, what distinguishes their monologues is that, although they have been called upon as crucial witnesses of events that led to the preventable death of someone in their care, it is precisely their reluctance to bear witness that is at the nexus of their monologues. When the young, unnamed ambulance paramedic is introduced, the audience are informed that, as Magnitsky was transferred, she sat in the front of the ambulance listening to the radio, never bothering to look back and check on Magnitsky. At first, she is unsure why she has even been called to provide evidence, and when called upon by the imagined investigator to provide further evidence stutters: ‘I have nothing to do with that... Dunno... Don’t remember.’⁷⁵ She further emphasises that it is her ‘right’ not to know what happened to Magnitsky in her ambulance, an implication that she has a ‘right’ not to bear witness to the events as she witnessed them.

Additionally, the following scene is delivered by the prison paramedic Sasha.

⁷³ Duggan (2012) 85.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 89.

⁷⁵ Gremina (2014) 455.

Like the medic in the ambulance, he too is reticent to recall exactly what he witnessed, and again defends himself on the grounds that he had nothing to do with Magnitsky's plight:

Shit, I don't know. Don't ask me man. They already asked me that. What was wrong with him? Fuck man, I dunno.⁷⁶

Instead of further recounting his own vital experience of Magnitsky's death, he is instead preoccupied with his mobile phone, and engages in what could be interpreted as a comic routine about ringtones and WiFi connection. These two scenes reveal that Putin's 'fictitious legalism' is embedded far deeper in the Russian legal process than just at the apical of the system, and they shock the audience into considering the impact of a mute and acquiescent population has in reinforcing the Putin regime. By creating a culture of apathy, the government has produced an ataractic and passive society that is unwilling to challenge the status quo either through indifference or fear of the repercussions. *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* reminds us that Putin's success cannot simply be accredited to his own manipulation of the democratic system, but also to the formation of deep-rooted political and social indifference in the Russian electorate.

Echoing Duggan's assertions that the act of witnessing imparts a responsibility to document the event, Paget similarly pays specific attention to the importance of witnessing in verbatim and tribunal theatre:

Documents have become vulnerable to postmodern doubt and information-mangement (a.k.a 'spin'). But the witness's claim to authenticity can still warrant a credible perspective.⁷⁷

Paget contends that since Weiss's productions in the 1960s, there has been a shift in documentary theatre, abandoning the written document and instead privileging the authenticity of oral testimony. Teatr.doc's production of *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* demonstrates that the semiosis of documentary theatre in Russia remains as much focused on the veracity of the document as by oral testimony. Although it is not the

⁷⁶ Ibid. 456.

⁷⁷ Paget (2009) 235-6.

case to say one form of testimony eclipses the other across the broad spectrum of productions, in Teatr.doc's performance of *One Hour Eighteen Minutes*, written documentation such as Magnitsky's letters and performance documents act as a beacon of authenticity in contrast to the incredulity of oral testimony.

One Hour Eighteen Minutes in the Repertoire

In Gremina's revised text, the relationship between documents is demonstrated in the way the play has been edited and expanded throughout its run in Teatr.doc's repertoire to accommodate new developments in the Magnitsky saga. In late 2012 Teatr.doc revised *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* in response to developments in the wake of the international outcry over Magnitsky's death. The 2012 version of the play was extended, and included a new scene that integrated the legislative tug-of-war fought between Russia and the Obama administration in the United States, as both countries sought to manipulate the tragedy of the Magnitsky affair. The revised production documents the Dima Yakovlev Act, also known under the moniker of the anti-Magnitsky law, passed in December 2012. The bill was instigated in reprisal for the Magnitsky Act passed by the U.S Congress, which prohibited those held accountable for Magnitsky's death entering to the United States. The anti-Magnitsky law was a response to the Magnitsky Act, devising a comparable list of individuals forbidden from entering Russia, and controversially banning the adoption of Russian children by citizens of the United States. In the updated staging of *One Hour Eighteen Minutes*, the actors break from their static performances, adopting a more relaxed and convivial tone for a new scene that addresses the anti-Magnitsky act. Still in character as the individuals who facilitated Magnitsky's death, the actors address the audience directly, continuing to eschew a naturalistic performance style as they recite sections from the recently published anti-Magnitsky law, celebrating the 'good news' that they have been exonerated by the state in the years since the original production in 2010.⁷⁸ The augmented staging of *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* in 2012 demonstrates the continued foregrounding of legal documents in Russian documentary theatre, communicating how the theatrical documentation of legal texts and laws can also find form in non-naturalistic, scripted scenes. Gremina's darkly comic treatment of the anti-Magnitsky act, exposes the farcical extremes the Putin administration will reach

⁷⁸ Transcription from a video recording of *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* (2012) shared with me by Elena Gremina.

in order to construct their own legal narrative in their longstanding concealment of the circumstances of Magnitsky's death.

One Hour Eighteen Minutes is not, however, just an attack on those who would not account for their involvement in Magnitsky's death, but a challenge to the audience to consider their own complicity in this political apathy. During the play, Gremina asks the audience not only to judge those responsible for Magnitsky's death but also to consider their own role as potential passive conductors of Putinism. In this way the production is not just holding up a mirror to the acquiescence of Russian society but is a call to arms for Teatr.doc's audience to be active participants in the witnessing of corruption and the state's involvement in the judiciary. In this way *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* is issuing a plea for a less politicised judicial system.

In the narrative of *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* the mending of the schism in Russian society can only be achieved through a refusal to succour the Kremlin's attempt to divide the country in fear and apathy. For Gremina, the despoliation of the legal system is illustrative of a nefarious political doctrine that rules with fear and division: the first act in making sure there are no more cases like Magnitsky's is the re-politicisation of the electorate and the eschewal of fear.

Conclusion

Since 2008 there has been a growing concern about the government's manipulation of the judicial system to prosecute and incarcerate individuals who challenge the regime. The narrative surrounding these cases has revealed a great anxiety about the way Putin has vehemently divided the country through the creation of a discourse that situates different factions of Russian society against one another. The Kremlin's punitive measures against opposition supporters revived a concern that Russia is returning to an era of political repression not seen since Soviet dictatorship, and provoked comparisons with the Stalin era that had previously been avoided in post-communist Russia. There is an increasing anxiety that Putin's use of the courts to repress civic activism is part of a tactic to divert public attention away from wider social issues by facilitating a rupture in society and producing a populace mistrustful and fearful of each other.

The intersection between the 'fictitious legalism' of the Putin administration and the act of documentation is a productive framework for a discussion of Russian

documentary theatre. Teatr.doc's documentary productions employ the broad aesthetics of Martin's 'theatre of the real' and techniques of verbatim theatre, reflecting a deep cynicism about the fairness of the Russian legal system, while attempting to establish their own theatrical justice in lieu of the state's failure to do so. Despite drawing from a wide dramatic genealogy, I argue that paramount to understanding both these plays' use of documentary material is their theatrical reappropriation of one of the foremost forms of grassroots and societal opposition to the Soviet government. Teatr.doc's documentary plays are distinctive hybrid performances that speak to the naturalism of the 'theatre of the real', yet employ non-naturalistic staging and acting techniques atypical of verbatim theatre and tribunal theatre. What unites these productions is that they call upon the tradition of *samizdat*, matching the clandestine documentation of Soviet trial procedures to contemporary concerns about Putinism's politicisation of the law. In this return to *samizdat* in theatrical form, documentation in performance has been used as a tool to expose the hypocrisy and tendentiousness of the Russian legal system. Gremina's faith in the veracity of physical documents in *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* contradicts Paget's argument that documentary theatre-makers have rejected the written document in favour of oral testimony. As a creative practice, the act of documentation and the privileging of the document is a vital feature of documentary theatre in Russia. It remains key to understanding how theatre-makers have sought to undermine the official discourse of the Putin regime and provoking their audience to consider their own role in challenging these manipulated judicial narratives.

Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, I have argued that New Drama constitutes one of the most important cultural forms of opposition to Putinism. Throughout this thesis I have contextualised the plays considered within the framework of Putinism, focusing on four key facets of Putin's presidency that have been identified by scholars and Russian political commentators: Putin the man; War and the military; social divide; and fictitious legalism. Across the chapters I have given examples of political theatre productions that facilitate wider dialogues on contemporary Russian society and culture. In my analysis of the plays discussed in this thesis, I have provided critical insight into how they foreground key anxieties that have been articulated by critics of the Kremlin through close textual readings and in-depth performance analysis to explore how New Drama productions have challenged the discourse of Putinism. In my consideration of these plays I situate them within the context of Russian theatre practice and culture in the twenty-first century, and also provide a wider investigation into theatre and performances studies through my consideration of how new playwriting can articulate new oppositional dialogues. This thesis shows how contemporary Russian theatre has provided a venue for the interrogation of Putin's normative discourse, and offers an original consideration of how theatre can contribute to the public sphere.

By examining works of New Drama I show how theatre makers in twenty-first century Russia have employed innovative theatrical aesthetics to contest the authoritarian rhetoric of the Putin regime by articulating the experience of marginalised citizens. New Drama has emerged as a significant locus of opposition despite the state's oppressive censorship of media and the arts, which manifests as an increasingly aggressive campaign of intimidation and coercion towards those who provide alternative narratives to the official state discourse. As stated in the introduction, one of the aims of this thesis was to explore how theatre makers have responded to the authoritarianism of the Putin regime. As the case studies demonstrate, Russian theatre makers have continued to defy active state censorship and anti-democratic legislation through their continued production of plays that boldly engage with contemporary politics and society. In this way, this thesis engages with recent scholarly work on censorship and the arts in the field of performance

studies, such as Helen Freshwater's monograph *Theatre Censorship in Britain: Silencing, Censure and Suppression*. Freshwater's exploration of censorship in British theatre has 'opened up difficult and important questions' over the relationship between the arts and censorship in contemporary society.¹ She observes that 'it seems that overt censorship can also be an inadvertent spur to creativity.'² In other words, even when artists are faced with the spectre of censorship, they find creative ways of challenging and overcoming state oppression. As the plays discussed in this thesis clearly demonstrate, New Drama playwrights have continued to write new shows and produce theatre under the increasing censorship of the Putin regime. Using contemporary Russia as an in-depth case, I have sought to show how theatre practice operates within this framework and how opposition discourses are vocalised in a theatrical context despite the very real threat of censorship, closure, and arrest for the artists. Freshwater's suggestion that theatre makers will often find creative responses to counter the state's active involvement in arts and culture is articulated in New Drama as the provocative confrontation of important political anxieties and the amplification of marginalised voices in Putin's Russia. In this way Russian theatre makers have provided an opportunity for oppositional discourses to be enlivened and debated in a public space. In the post show discussions at Teatr.doc, audience members are further encouraged to eschew this censorship by engaging in important conversations about contemporary political events, and the role new playwriting can play in subverting Putin's autocracy.

In his book *The Theatrical Public Sphere*, theatre academic Christopher Balme examines the relationship between live performance and the public sphere, analysing how theatre can impact on public issues and debate. Balme's work 'explores what role theatre and performance play in this realm, how a specific theatrical public sphere can be defined and in what way performance and theatre theory can contribute to the debates.'³ He identifies that there has been an upsurge in academic studies in the relationship between publics and performance, noting that the 'revival of interest in the public sphere is a direct response to change in ecology of theatre and performance as well as the arts in more general terms.'⁴ In examining theatre's potential to create an oppositional public sphere, Balme expands extant

¹ Freshwater (2009) 3.

² Ibid. 164.

³ Balme (2014) 5.

⁴ Ibid. 12.

critical theory on ‘the relationship between performance and the public sphere, theatre’s efficacy as an interlocutor in public debates, and the mediatized forms that a theatrical public sphere employs today.’⁵ The relationship between performance and the public sphere have been debated in other recent studies, including by theatre scholar Janelle Reinelt. Reinelt writes that theatre ‘can contribute to the public sphere by offering its public performances to join with other sorts of interventions by similar and different publics to negotiate the determinate matter of our everyday local and global lives. It can engage politics by feeling political, and stimulating political thoughts and actions, and by attending to the arrangements of our ongoing sociality.’⁶

In this thesis’s engagement into how New Drama has countered and responded to the politics of the Putin regime, I have similarly attempted to contextualise how the staging of these plays provides an important site for provoking political debate and civic engagement in twenty-first century Russia. Drawing on how the New Drama canon highlights social injustice, I have considered how these productions have situated themselves in the context of the nascent opposition movement in Russia. I have placed these case studies in a wider discussion of how theatre and performance can intervene and provoke audience members to consider their own role in the public sphere and the democratic process. In this way, this thesis contributes to both the study of contemporary Russian theatre, as well as providing a unique engagement with recent debates in the field of theatre and performance. The close reading of these plays demonstrates how theatre makers in twenty-first century Russia have produced a body of theatrical work that intervenes in the public sphere and provides a site for political and social debate.

The first chapter in this thesis aims to situate New Drama in the contexts of Russian theatre and global theatre practices. It examines how the transnational exchange of theatrical ideas that influenced and facilitated the development of New Drama has been at odds with the increasingly nationalistic cultural policies of the Putin regime. By considering the historical context of the movement, it argues that while the Royal Court Theatre played a significant factor in the galvanisation of New Drama, there was already a pre-existing new writing culture in the 1990s and the

⁵ Ibid. 194.

⁶ Reinelt (2015) 48. For another recent example of how performance studies have interrogated the relationship between theatre and the public sphere see Reinelt’s article ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere for a Global Age’ (2011).

theatre of Liudmila Petrushevskaja in the 1970s and 80s, which vocalised marginalised discourses and stage alternative narratives that challenged the status quo.

Chapter Two investigates how New Drama writers have employed political satire to critique and travesty Putin and Putinism through analysis of the plays *BerlusPutin* and *Putin.doc*. By examining disparate satirical forms, I suggest that there has been a turning point in how Putin's autocracy is viewed in Russia. *Putin.doc*, written in 2005, focuses its satirical critique on Putin's supporters, identifying how their fevered devotion to the president has been responsible in bolstering his political standing. In Varvara Faer's *BerlusPutin*, however, Putin's grip on power is presented as stemming from his creation of a media persona and his authoritarian leadership. Furthermore, this chapter shows how New Drama writers have situated more traditional forms of political theatre such as satire within the artistic context of New Drama. For example, the setting of a neutral black box space and the use of video projection in *BerlusPutin* demonstrate the assimilation of tradition forms of political critique into the aesthetics of New Drama. Finally, this chapter shows how New Drama has aligned itself with the nascent anti-Putin protest movement in Russia, asking its audience to consider how theatre and art can act as protest and a political act.

Chapter Three examines the Second Chechen War and its legacy on the development of Putinism in the 2000s. It observes that as a direct result of the Russian invasion of Chechnya, Putin revived the role of the military in public life, and emphasised the notion of militarised masculinity. I contextualise this chapter within the work of gender theorists R. W. Connell, Maya Eichler, and Valerie Sperling. The case studies for this chapter are Mikhail and Vyacheslav Durnenkov *The Drunks* and *The Soldier* by Pavel Pryazhko. These two New Drama productions are widely divergent in their construction of narrative, staging, acting techniques, language, and performance spaces in which they were performed. This chapter illustrates how, despite this, both plays provoke important and varied discussions about the role of the army in modern Russia. The plays foreground the embodied presence of the male actor to subvert the 'hegemonic masculinity' of the Putin regime providing 'counter-narratives' to the official discourse of Putinism. Furthermore, in this chapter's consideration of *The Soldier*, I argue that through the format of the play Pryazhko provokes a debate about the form theatre should take, facilitating a wider dialogue on politics and Putinism.

The fourth chapter analyses two plays by Vassily Siagrev in the context of augmenting social divide in Russia during Putin's presidency. *Plasticine* and *Black Milk* articulate a subversive narrative that undermines the rhetoric of Putin's state-building narrative concerning the economic success of his policies. In its portrayal of marginalised anti-hero Maksim, *Plasticine* raises important questions about the co-option of public space and the communities in Russia's provinces excluded from the economic benefit experienced by the large cities in the west of the country. In *Black Milk*, Siagrev creates a comic conflict between the urban and the rural that highlights social divides and subverts the normative discourse of an electorate united behind the policies of Putinism. Additionally, I suggest that interpretations of Siagrev's plays as archetypal reproduction of British 'In-Yer-Face' are reductive and simplistic. Instead, Siagrev weaves Russia themes and contexts into the plays that make use of specific historical contexts from both Tsarist and Soviet Russia. I contend that these productions do not only hold up a mirror to the plight of the provincial poor for the entertainment of urbanite Russian and international audiences in the West, but instead form part of the important canon of New Drama plays that explicitly utilise Russian themes to contextualise contemporary politics and Putinism, exposing their audience to alternative and marginalised discourses and oppositional ideas.

The final chapter of this thesis examines two documentary plays produced by Teatr.doc that engage with Kirill Rogov's definition of the Kremlin's 'fictitious legalism'.⁷ I argue that like the precedent set by *samizdat* literature, documentary theatre is used as a method of recording these denials of truth, and vocalises the importance of creating counter narratives that attempt to dispel the fabrication of official testimony and documents. Through my analysis of Polina Borodina's *The Bolotnaya Square Case* and Elena Gremina's *One Hour Eighteen Minutes*, this chapter demonstrates how Russian documentary theatre can vary in style and form. Both plays foreground the significance of documentation in different ways. *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* underscores the importance of the physical documents that record Magnitsky's alleged mistreatment and murder, while *The Bolotnaya Square Case* encourages audience members to engage in their own production of documents after the show. The documentary material drawn upon in these productions takes the form of verbatim testimony, but additionally their productions stage physical documents

⁷ Rogov (2012).

and materials, including personal artefacts and letters. Through this chapter's examination of the status of material documents in the 'theatre of the real', it makes a contribution to wider international studies on documentary and verbatim theatre by scholars including Carol Martin and Derek Paget. By historically contextualising twenty-first century documentary theatre practices within both national and international documentary traditions, it reaffirms the act of documentation and the privileging of the document in Russian documentary theatre to expose the hypocrisy and tendentiousness of the legal system.

Drawing on interviews with Russian theatre makers, archival work, and my experience of attending New Drama performances in Russia, has provided me with an important framework for situating the plays within the social and political context of the state. In particular, what has arisen from my research is the way in which many New Drama performances provide an important independent space for audience members to openly engage in political dialogue, challenging the political acquiescence towards the Putin regime. It is through this creation of an alternative dialogue that New Drama can be seen to challenge the praxis of Putinism.

The plays examined in this thesis illustrate how wide ranging New Drama productions engage with the politics of Putinism. In my analysis of the case studies, this thesis has shown how the New Drama canon has emerged as a key cultural opposition to the Putin regime, which has resulted in the creation of a distinct political engagement within the Russian theatre. I have observed throughout my thesis that the plays considered here do not always provide an explicitly anti-Putin dialogue. For example, much of Polina Borodina's verbatim testimony included in *The Bolotnaya Square Case* focuses on the diurnal experience of the family members of the imprisoned protestors. Instead of focusing on the impassioned rhetoric of the protest movement, the majority of their testimony recalls the mundane aspects of everyday life and relationships between friends and family. In a similar way, Pryazhko's *The Soldier* focuses on the performance of a series of routine daily acts, such as showering and preparing a cup of coffee. In this performance it is the communicative silence and the embodied presence of the male actor that resists the militarised hegemonic masculinity of the Putin regime. Instead these plays provide an opposition to the discourse of the Kremlin by staging those marginalised and excluded by the Putin regime. By doing so, they provide a vital alternative narrative to the state sponsored media. As Reinelt states in her work on theatre and the public sphere, theatre's

‘efficaciousness is not solitary – theatre cannot change the world – but it can and sometimes does work towards change alongside the other multiple avenues of public expression.’⁸ While New Drama may not always directly subvert Putin’s grip on power the performances of these plays provides a vital component in the creation of a cohesive oppositional discourse. Through their performance of alternative voices, New Drama playwrights highlight the importance of alternative narratives and theatre’s role in challenging audience members to consider their own role in Putin’s autocracy.

In my consideration of New Drama, I have identified an important connection between the emergence of the movement in the early 2000s and the rise of Putinism. I have argued that New Drama positions itself directly in relationship to the policies of the Putin regime and the social and political developments in Russia. More importantly, this study contends that New Drama, and in particular *Teatr.doc*, has facilitated new cultural and political attitudes that challenge the pervasive discourse of the Putin regime. By investigating the intersection between New Drama and the politics of Putinism, this thesis has illustrated how contemporary Russian playwriting has emerged as one of the most important and exciting artistic interventions to challenge the Putin’s presidency. In the introduction to this thesis I stated that the appearance of New Drama at the turn of the millennium marked a significant moment in the history and evolution of Russian theatre. In my examination of the New Drama movement I have contextualised these plays within an important framework of Russian theatre and politics, but also provided an original contribution to performance studies on how theatre makers can produce plays and performances that impact on the public sphere and offer alternative cultural narratives.

When I started my research for this project in 2013, it was impossible to predict the dramatic developments that occurred in the following four years in relation to New Drama’s precarious engagement with Putinism. Since Putin’s re-election to the presidency in 2012 there has been a shift in the Kremlin’s attitude towards art and culture that was contemporaneous to the rapid development of the anti-Putin protest movement in 2011-13. In particular theatre makers have found the political climate increasingly repressive and restrictive. In May 2014, the state Duma banned the use of *mat* (vulgar language and swearing) throughout the arts and media, with fines for

⁸ Reinelt (2015) 48-9.

breaking the ruling reaching 50,000 rubles. On 30 December 2014, during the final night at Teatr.doc's original space on Trekhprudnyi Pereulok – a free screening of a documentary film *Stronger than Arms* (*Silnee, chem Oruzhie*, 2014) about the public protest at Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kiev the following year– the evening was interrupted by police officers who stormed the building claiming there had been a bomb threat reported. After searching for explosives, members of the Ministry of Culture closed the space and welded the entrance to the theatre shut. Then in May 2015, a week after the première of *The Bolotnaya Square Case*, the landlord of Teatr.doc's new space on Spartakovskaia Ulitsa abruptly terminated the company's lease after an order from Moscow's Department of Property. As I reached the completion of this thesis in August 2017, Kirill Serebrennikov, artistic director of the acclaimed Moscow theatre the Gogol Centre was arrested on politically motivated charges of embezzlement and placed under house arrest that has now been extended until July 2018, in a case described by John Freedman as a 'show trial.'⁹ At the time, my Facebook wall was filled with messages of concern from Russian theatre makers wondering what the wider implications were for this on theatre practice in the country. Contemporaneous to this, however, has been an increasing politicisation of Russian society. As Varvara Faer observes, many of her friends have become politically active, producing posters for rallies and attending opposition meetings.¹⁰

It remains to be seen how playwrights and theatre practitioners will respond to these political developments in their art in the future. What is clear, however, is that despite the tactics of intimidation detailed above, Russian theatre practitioners have continued to produce urgent and important productions that subvert the state's normative discourse. As Freshwater reminds us: 'overt censorship also tends to generate resistance' within arts and culture.¹¹ In the wake of Putin's re-election for a further six years on 18 March 2018, Russian theatre makers' continuing response to the authoritarian politics of Putinism remains a vital and important subject in contemporary theatre.

⁹ Freedman (2017).

¹⁰ Faer (2012b).

¹¹ Freshwater (2009) 165.

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