



Boris Yukhananov in Space and Time

By John Freedman

The path Boris Yukhananov has traversed throughout his forty years in art has been anything but the usual tale of a common career. Today he is the artistic director of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre, a venue whose origins reach back to Konstantin Stanislavsky's legendary Opera and Drama Studio, and which, for 70 years, has been one of the most prominent dramatic playhouses in Moscow. That position may represent the biggest jewel in his crown to date, but it says precious little about this artist who has never taken a well-worn path. Nothing Yukhananov did in his first three decades as a theatre artist would have indicated he would be chosen one day to run one of Russia's most storied playhouses. Everything that transpired between Yukhananov's years spent studying under the legendary directors Anatoly Vasilyev and Anatoly Efros in the early 1980s, and his present tenure as the head of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre, happened entirely on his own terms, and always outside of conventional expectations.

Speaking figuratively, Yukhananov is, and always has been, a polyglot of artistic languages. For the better part of three decades, until 2013, he forged a rich life in Russia's artistic underground, flexing his muscles as a theatre director, filmmaker, designer, graphic artist, poet, novelist, teacher and theoretician. He was an active irritant to, and a philosophical opponent of, everything mainstream. With a healthy laugh, but a stern gaze indicating he was only partly jesting - and in an age when one could still make jokes on the topic - he used to advocate what he called

“*theatrical terrorist acts.*” The idea was that his actors would burst into some sleep-inducing performance running at a traditional theatre, quickly inject some life by acting out a provocative scene or two, and then run for the exits leaving everyone to ponder what had just happened.

It’s important to point out that he never did oversee any such aggressive acts on other people’s territory, nor did he have to. As an outsider and as a theorist, it was enough for Yukhananov to make his point about underground art versus traditional art merely by describing in rich detail how much fun such disruptive sorties would be, and how much meaning they could have for everyone involved. The idea that he could do it if he wanted was important to him and to his understanding of art. Yukhananov has always been interested in establishing what is theoretically possible, and in pushing the limits of the known and the accepted.

Yukhananov stood at the source of numerous innovative, non-government enterprises that cut across generic lines in the stagnant, late-Soviet period of the 1980s. He co-founded the first independent ballet theatre in Leningrad, and his Theatre Theatre company, which performed in public spaces, was that city’s first independent dramatic theatre. He was a founding member of the so-called “*parallel cinema*” movement in Russia, which sought boldly to establish itself as a free, exploratory alternative to the staid, prevailing Soviet film industry. His MIR, a Russian acronym standing for Studio of Individual Directing, founded in 1988, was Russia’s first independent theatre school and production company.

As important as all this was for the counter-culture in Russia - to say nothing of Yukhananov’s personal development - few would have denied that this director’s always unorthodox and always challenging work flew under the radar. When he unleashed shows on the unsuspecting public, they often did not know what to make of them. His productions routinely played for small audiences and did not remain in performance for long. Witness this description of one of Yukhananov’s first-ever productions, in 1986: “*Teetering on the verge of disaster, this loose, relaxed production of The Misanthrope premiered in one of the courtyards of the always-noisy Arbat in Moscow*” (Timofeeva “Theatre”).

Yukhananov’s next production, *Mon Repos*, also in 1986, was based on texts by Vladimir Nabokov and Joseph Brodsky - both essentially still banned in Russia. That was hardly the production’s most provocative aspect, however. This show was performed as something of a walking tour, with spectators being guided from scene to scene in and around an abandoned Leningrad building by a silent guide who directed their attention to points of interest with a flashlight. Ultimately, the intrepid audience members were led to the building’s top floor where they seemed to think they witnessed an actor leaping to his death while reciting Brodsky’s “Christmas Romance.” However, led to another window, they looked down to see the actor happily waving good-bye as he disappeared into the night. At this point the guide turned off his flashlight and left the spectators to make their way out of the building on their own. Describing this show many years ago, Yukhananov laughed good-naturedly and said, “*That’s when the real horror theatre started!*” (Freedman).

Ever the playful director, Yukhananov ended *Mon Repos* on a conciliatory note. When the spectators finally made their way down out of the building they found drinks and snacks and a few laughs awaiting them on the street level.

The Yukhananov of 1986 and 2018 are vastly different, of course. His work is now much more complex and sophisticated, as are the conceptions underlying it. But as an artist he has unwaveringly remained true to himself. His frequent collaborator, designer Stepan Lukyanov, notes that, “*Boris is capable of working in any kind of space. He has never feared any of the messes that come with the organization of having sets built on time. I believe this self-confidence*

of his is a holdover from his underground days in the '80s. In those years he had very little choice about when and where (his shows performed)" (Lukyanov).

Yukhananov has always worked among large groups of trusted colleagues, and today he continues to surround himself with teams of trusted designers, composers, and choreographers. He has always believed in the artist as a visionary who leads the public toward something they had not previously imagined or understood. Implicit in that belief is the conviction that it is the responsibility of spectators to expand their horizons and challenge their expectations in order to understand what an artist is seeking to accomplish. At the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre Yukhananov institutionalized this aspect of his work in the so-called School of Contemporary Spectators and Listeners, an ambitious program of lectures, meetings, book presentations, exhibits, installations, film screenings, concerts and other such audience outreach projects that run almost every day of the season and encourage the public to look behind the scenes, and into the essence, of how contemporary art is made and perceived. Another constant in Yukhananov's work has been size. He seems inexorably drawn to large-scale work.

Orphic Games, his most recent production at the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre (premiere in Moscow, May 2018), is officially described as "a single work in 33 acts, presented in 12 productions over a six-day period." Compare that to one of the director's earliest works, a project called *The Mad Prince* video novel in 1,000 cassettes (1986-93), and it becomes clear that scope and volume are crucial aspects of Yukhananov's ongoing artistic vision. Even a work as "small" as the 90-minute opera *Octavia. Trepanation* (premiere at the Holland Festival, June 2017) impressed with its physical size.

The focal point of Stepan Lukyanov's set design was an enormous replica of the head of Vladimir Lenin that measured seven and a half meters in height, and six meters in diameter from the tip of his nose to the back of his head. The forehead alone, when opened, was spacious enough to accommodate a chorus of eight singers, while onstage a chorus of 80 singers dressed as two-meter, headless terra cotta warriors, marched to and fro in tight unison.

One might argue that Yukhananov discovered his own future when, in 1989, he initiated work on a project that came to be known as *The Garden*. He embarked on what appears in retrospect to have been a relatively modest project in the country near the small town of Kratovo, 40 kilometers southeast of Moscow. Surrounded in an outdoor setting by his students comprising the second class of MIR, Yukhananov began a detailed analysis of the text of Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. The title that he gave their work was *A Mystery Play in Kratovo* and it was anything but a common reading of Chekhov. The actors experimented with the text by playing "dramatic games" that intermingled Chekhov's characters and situations with some aspect of real life, bringing us back to the director's unique concept of "terrorism" in art.

Anna Pavlenko, the Russian chronicler of Yukhananov's work, elaborates:

"The task of the 'dramatic games' was to discover new opportunities for a particular genre, conditioned by certain criteria - in part, by destroying these criteria. This kind of 'art-terrorism' was built on the intrusion of reality into an artistic text. It is what Yukhananov calls 'swings': the rocking of action and its constant transitions from a real zone of being to an artistic zone and back again. Such 'intrusions' might affect both casual passersby on the street, or the director interrupting the action with a sudden comment or analysis. Thus did the stormy, intense life of The Garden occasionally emerge into the urban landscape" (Pavlenko "Studio").

The Garden (which could also be translated as *The Orchard*, after Chekhov, although the biblical echoes in *The Garden* are closer to the director's intent) was the first of Yukhananov's many marathon theatre productions. By the time he closed the project in 2001, it had gone through eight so-called "regenerations," each of which changed the piece significantly and was performed in vastly different spaces, from a meadow in Kratovo, to stages at the School of Dramatic Art or the Mossovet Theatre in Moscow, to theatres in St. Petersburg, Kiev, London and Edinburgh. It began as a simple piece with actors in their own clothes playing at revealing layers of Chekhov's text, and, by the mid-1990s, developed into a visually striking piece that played over a two-day period, each day's performance running close to four hours. The characters, as dressed by designer Yury Kharikov for the fourth regeneration, resembled a cross between giant insects, interstellar plants and 18th-century courtiers, all of whom stepped onto the stage from something rather like an inflatable spaceship.

The public life of these regenerations, or versions, of *The Garden* was short-lived. But the work linking them was, at least until the late 1990s, almost constantly ongoing. It meant that each regeneration emerged as something new and independent, although its roots and many of its physical attributes reached back to a common origin. No difference among regenerations was as marked as between the fourth and fifth in 1996 when Yukhananov introduced a large number of actors with Down syndrome into the ever-developing version of Chekhov's play about innocence lost. He included them in the action as active observers and commentators - not-so-distant relatives of those actors that Yukhananov imagined engaging in "theatrical terrorist acts" on other theatres' turf.

Yukhananov has observed many times over the years - not least of which, in his film series *Down People Comment on the World* - that individuals with Down syndrome are unwaveringly sincere in their reactions to others. They accept everything that happens as real and true, so that, for example, when the actress playing Ranevskaya suffers, the Down syndrome actors commiserate with her with a deep-felt sincerity that cannot be affected. It is absolutely genuine. As such, when these newcomers to the cast of *The Garden* interrupted the action of Chekhov's play to comment, to elucidate, or to respond in some way - either by direct commentary or by reciting their own poetry inspired by their work on the performance - they brought a truth and urgency to the tale that no common theatrical performance could possibly have provided.

Yukhananov developed his interest in expanded theatrical space and, particularly, time, in such subsequent projects as *Faust* (six regenerations over a decade, 1999 to 2009), and *LaboraTORiAH. Golem* (2007-2011), a multi-day mix of open rehearsal, improvisation, textual experimentation, "theatrical terrorism" as we have defined it, and deep exploration of those points where Jewish religious thinking crosses paths with theatrical practice.

"Boris feels comfortable with large spans of time," explains Stepan Lukyanov, who has designed numerous of Yukhananov's works over the years, *"and this, I think, is a sign of his absolute freedom. He creates something akin to 'subaqueous' temporal landscapes (stress on the 's') through which audience members swim. In some productions, the spectator even has the opportunity to come up 'on shore' at any moment in time during the action to catch his breath by visiting the snack bar or even going off somewhere to take care of affairs, after which he can dive back under the sea again. [Yukhananov] gives you the opportunity to enter the waters of the same river two, three or even more times. And each time the river will be the same - though not entirely the same. This is a completely different approach to theatre, to action, and to entertainment, and it is grounded in absolute freedom and in an absolute trust in the spectator"* (Lukyanov).

Lukyanov, of course, speaks from a contemporary perspective, having fresh impressions of the seven productions Yukhananov has staged since taking over the old Stanislavsky Drama Theatre in the summer of 2013 and reopening it as the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre in January 2015, a remarkable event in Russian theatre history that deserves to be told in some detail.

The heads of Russian theatres, especially important ones, have always been appointed by cultural bureaucrats without public discussion of any kind. To the surprise of everyone inside and outside the process, the Moscow Ministry of Culture broke with tradition in early 2013 by announcing that the leadership at two venues would be opened to a merit-based competition. Anyone wishing to assume the responsibility of running these venues could participate by submitting business and strategic plans for the future. Yukhananov, the famed outsider, put forth a compelling, vastly ambitious program for rebuilding, restoring and remaking the Stanislavsky Drama Theatre, largely on money that would be raised independently. (Low estimates of the proposed cost ran around \$25 million.) In a decision that shocked the status quo and thrilled those interested in progressive theatre, his proposal was deemed the most convincing and he was named the new artistic director of the Stanislavsky.

Yukhananov immediately hired Wowhaus, one of Moscow's leading architectural firms, to completely rebuild the old theatre, whose basic structures dated to 1915. The guiding purpose was to preserve and enhance all remaining historical elements, while recalibrating everything else to the needs of a 21st-century multipurpose cultural center (Wowhaus).

When Yukhananov greeted guests at the gala opening of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre on 26 January 2015, he offered Muscovites their first glimpse of their city's newest, most spectacular performance space. That, however, was but one aspect of the director's plan. In an era when Russia's official cultural policy was growing increasingly conservative, if not to say jingoistic, he made a bold statement that he considered Moscow an integral part of the European cultural landscape. In the Electrotheatre's first few months Yukhananov presented productions by three master European directors - Theodoros Terzopoulos (*The Bacchae*), Romeo Castellucci (*The Human Use of Human Beings*), and Heiner Goebbels (*Max Black, or, 62 Ways of Supporting the Head with a Hand*), all of which entered the venue's revolving repertoire. No Russian theatre in any age had ever gone to such lengths to put itself in the European - dare I say it? - mainstream.

At the same time, Yukhananov began unveiling several of his own works, two of which - *The Blue Bird*, based loosely on the play by Maurice Maeterlinck, and the opera series *Drillalians* - were among the most ambitious he had mounted to date.

The Blue Bird runs for approximately 10 hours over three consecutive days and is broken into segments titled "Journey," "Night" and "Bliss."

Well over half the performance is based on text drawn from the personal memories of the two veteran actors playing the children Tytyl and Mytyl. Vladimir Korenev (Tytyl) joined the Stanislavsky in 1961, two years after his wife Alefina Konstantinova (Mytyl). Both led dramatic lives in and out of art, so that their reminiscences of World War II (Konstantinova surviving the violent death of her mother), the hey-day of the Stanislavsky Theatre in the 1960s, the mad world of Soviet film stardom (Korenev), and the disillusionment of Perestroika and two failed coups in the early 1990s, all wrap their characters' search for the blue bird of happiness in the cloak of their own generation's often convoluted search for peace and meaning. *The Blue Bird* emerged as more than a deep exploration of Soviet and Russian cultural history, it was a profound reconsideration of 100 years of life in Russia.

In terms of theatrical content, *The Blue Bird* was aggressively eclectic. It included scenes built on Japanese Noh theatre, Chinese opera, Soviet pop music, puppet theatre, documentary drama, stand-up comedy, museum tours, art installations, faithful reprisals of scenes from productions that hadn't been performed at the Stanislavsky for 50 years, and much more. The often extravagant costumes by Anastasia Nefyodova emphasized the origin of the work as a fairy-tale, but pushed it much further into the realm of fantasy.

Yukhananov and set designer Yury Kharikov chose to thrust the century-old tale into the modern world by locating many of the scenes in, on, or around a life-size replica of a Boeing 777 fuselage. Kharikov tells the intriguing story of this most unusual set prop.

After we determined the parameters of the set design - the main element of which was the fragment of a Boeing 777 fuselage reproduced in detail - the question arose as to whether it would be necessary to scale down its dimensions. But in a happy, almost magical, coincidence, the fuselage's actual diameter fit the dimensions of the scene to within a millimeter. We still had to consider the effect of tilting the deck of the aircraft during the episode related to the memory of the war. This was not easy to do, for the actors sat fastened to their seats on the upper deck. Ultimately we did it with the help of a special hydraulic mechanism and an internal piece that rotates. Even oxygen masks pop out when the deck is tilted, just as in a real airplane.

It became a rather complex structure, although with almost imperceptible visual mass. All the mechanisms and the supporting moving platform are hidden from the spectator. As a result, the fuselage seems to float on an air cushion about twenty centimeters from the floor. A detachable canvas that serves at times as a projection screen and hides the interior of the plane at the beginning of the performance was fixed to the circumference of the cut.

"A small copy of a Boeing 777 with wings and rotating turbine engines hangs front of the big fuselage slice. Attached to a cable winch, it is able to fly up and down, forward and backward over the stage. Behind the glowing control panel in the cockpit sit the captain and his navigator, two Ken dolls outfitted in specially tailored crew uniforms" (Kharikov).

Yukhananov followed *The Blue Bird* with *Drillalians*, an opera fantasia that established a whole new avenue of creativity not only for Yukhananov, but for Russian theatre in general. *Drillalians* - the futuristic tale of a civilization whose central concept is the drill, and which exists simultaneously in the past, present and future - is what Yukhananov defined as an opera series. It consists of six independent operas written by six different composers, that run over a five-day span.

The verse libretto, written by Yukhananov, eschews plot coherency in favor of swells of imagistic scenes that repeatedly return us to familiar characters or situations, though always in new or unexpected guises. The story of a nation - Drillalia - that is simultaneously dying and being reborn is not told in a traditional narrative manner, but rather emerges suggestively, in varying shades from the scenes that are acted out over the five-day period.

The opera's fantastic visual aspect is dominated by Anastasia Nefyodova's billowing, flowering, curvaceous, otherworldly costumes, while Stepan Lukyanov's set design takes its often sleek look from elaborate video backgrounds and minimalistic props. *Drillalians* took the episodic, fantastic nature of *The Blue Bird* and expanded it several times over. It was beautiful, challenging and daunting all at once.

The appearance of *Drillalians* in the repertoire of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre not only brought to fruition one of Yukhananov's first stated goals - to go back to the foundation laid by Konstantin Stanislavsky himself in his short-lived, but famous Opera and Drama Studio - it established a precedent for future work at the theatre. *Drillalians* was a bold statement that opera

could have a home in the context of a dramatic theatre, and it rewrote the playbook for the genre's contemporary form. Several of Yukhananov's subsequent works have either been operas or hybrid productions that employ multiple composers in the writing of the music. *Galileo. Opera for Violin and Scientist* (2017) employed five composers writing discrete musical scenes within the ninety-minute performance, while *Orphic Games* was created with four staff composers overseeing the complex musical underpinnings of this marathon, six-day affair.

In the three years following the premiere of *Drillalians*, the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre produced six newly commissioned contemporary operas (eleven if we count *Drillalians* as consisting of six distinct works). This would be an impressive number for any major opera house. For a dramatic theatre it was quite simply unprecedented. Dmitri Kourliandski, the theatre's musical director and primary composer, put this development into perspective:

"The Electrotheatre has taken on the responsibility of the philharmonic or the opera theatre, redeeming their debt to new music. Several dozen composers have passed through these walls since the theatre came into existence, and all have made full-fledged contributions to its musical and dramatic projects" (Kourliandski, promo booklet).

Drillalians established the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre as a major producer of contemporary musical theatre.

A somewhat daunting artistic term - new processualism - began appearing frequently in conversations and writings about Yukhananov's next major work, a massive, five-day production titled *The Golden Ass. The Open-circuited Workspace* (premiere in May 2016). It is characteristic of Yukhananov not to be satisfied merely to offer a new manner of performance or approach to theatre art, he is often compelled to control the language which is used to describe what he has done. Over the decades his theoretical essays have framed his work in his own terminology rather than in a vocabulary or with concepts employed regularly among critics or theatre practitioners. The film version of *LaboraTORiAH. Golem* contains fascinating, and hilarious, scenes of Yukhananov's in-performance dialogues with a handful of Jewish theatre makers in Vienna in 2007. These guests invariably wish to perceive and comment on the project evolving in front of them from traditional points of view based on the understanding of the theatre process as a linear progression from conception to rehearsal, and to finished performance that is then repeated in more or less unchanged form until the production ceases to be performed. Yukhananov repeatedly parries them by insisting that he is not interested in results, not interested in a pathway that leads to results - he and his actors are exploring the nature and substance of process. In fact, Yukhananov tells his often bewildered audience (consisting of accomplished directors and performers) that the performance they are watching will actually help write future versions of *LaboraTORiAH. Golem*. Indeed, in another year or two, characters based on the Viennese spectators, as well as on Yukhananov himself, show up in subsequent editions of the piece. It was the case of a work giving birth to itself by means of the specific stages that it went through.

As a descriptive concept, new processualism had been an aspect of Yukhananov's work since the mid-1980s. But by the time of *LaboraTORiAH* 20 years later, it seems legitimate to say that it had become a genuine creative method. By this time in Yukhananov's own artistic development, new processualism was the very conscious act of following the peculiarities of process in search of the work, as opposed to working through a preconceived notion toward a result.

Writing about the new processual aspects of *LaboraTORiAH. Golem*, Yelena Lyubarskaya points out that even participants encountering Yukhananov's method for the first time occasionally saw it as something deeply challenging.

“Accustomed to clearly formatted types of existence, the participants for the first time in their lives found themselves in a project devoid of distinct form, lacking the expectation of a finale, and missing clearly established playing and behavioral rules. In *LaboraTORiAH*, as in other of Yukhananov’s projects, rules were formed gradually, were [constantly] modified, and were the consequence and continuation of the artistic development of the project, its images and meanings” (Lyubarskaya).

Yukhananov put this reliance on process right into the title of *The Golden Ass. The Open-circuited Workspace*. That is, the workspace that gave rise to the performances known as *The Golden Ass* was “open-circuited,” was not result oriented, and, at least in the early going, unfolded in a course of development that presumed an audience to be a part of the creative space. On the whole, *The Golden Ass* began as an enormous series of scenes and studies created on the basis of Apuleius’ picaresque novel by Stanislavsky Electrotheatre company members and students of MIR-4 (the fourth group of students to matriculate in Yukhananov’s Studio of Individual Directing). Over time, Yukhananov and his core creative team (composer Dmitri Kourliandski, designers Yury Kharikov and Stepan Lukyanov, costume designer Anastasia Nefyodova, choreographer Andrei Kuznetsov-Vecheslov), began selecting and developing the scenes that they believed offered the most promise. There might be four or five vastly different interpretations of the same scene (of Venus confronting Cupid for falling in love with Psyche, for example), but every one of those that possessed intrinsic value was retained in the five-day series of scenes that were presented to the public. The visual aspect of *The Golden Ass* was relatively simple - most of the stage environments were built around five free-standing columns that stagehands could easily move from place to place with small levers attached to the bases.

The repetitive nature of *The Golden Ass* created a layered effect, wherein spectators would often see one and the same thing from vastly different points of view. Depending upon the creators of any given scene, Venus (or other characters) might be phlegmatic, wily, disinterested, or manipulative. This created a stereoscopic vision of the scenes drawn from Apuleius’ narrative, suggesting that there is no “correct” interpretation of the novel, although one can compile a compendium of versions that expresses the novel’s intent much more fully than a single interpretation might. The predominant theme throughout the segments was the hero’s journey, the initiation of the narrator-turned-ass in the wisdom and follies of the world.

Yukhananov, having declared he was playing the role of Isis, repeatedly interrupted the early public performances of *The Golden Ass*, offering commentary and advice. Rather as had happened in *LaboraTORiAH. Golem*, actors appeared on stage playing different versions of Yukhananov, thus finding a place in the evolving performance for the director’s own words and actions. But Yukhananov himself also continued to play an active role in the public showings. Perhaps one of the most amusing takes place when he leaves the auditorium and encourages audience members to follow him out to the theatre’s courtyard. Some did, but many, still restrained by their accustomed beliefs that one watches theatre by sitting in one’s seat, could not bring themselves to leave. Their confusion increased when a live video feed of Yukhananov on street was projected into the auditorium. He continued to entice spectators to come join him, although most stayed put to wait for what would happen next on stage.

The Golden Ass, premiering just 15 months after Yukhananov opened the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre, was easily the director’s most ambitious, far-ranging work ever. It indicated two very important truths 1) the environs of a large, repertory theatre were obviously advantageous to this artist who had shuffled for decades in the land of the freelancer, and 2) this artist was fully

prepared to take advantage of the opportunities that a big, repertory theatre could offer him. Put simply, he was up to the task.

Orphic Games. Punk-macrame (premiering May 2018) was the director's seventh major work at the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre. In terms of scope, conception, and execution it was an exponential leap beyond even *The Golden Ass*.

Film director Alexander Zeldovich called it a "monumental" achievement. "*Watching one of [the six days] is meaningless,*" he wrote, "*you will not see a thing. It is important to see everything; to examine this island you must walk through it, or, better yet, hike around the entire thing, it's huge - just like Yukhananov's ingenuity and directorial generosity*" (Zeldovich).

As *The Garden* grew out of Yukhananov's work with the students of MIR-2 and *The Golden Ass* emerged from work with MIR-4, *Orphic Games* came into being after two years of work with the 100 students that were admitted to the MIR-5 class. All of the students - technically speaking future directors - were tasked with creating multiple scenes based on the myth of Orpheus, primarily using texts written by Jean Anouilh and Jean Cocteau. By the time the full cluster of works was pulled together into a cohesive unit there were 120 performers taking part.

"*Orphic Games is constructed as a network of narratives, a system of refrains and repetitions, where the same event is presented in different contexts and a variety of stylistic ways, sometimes even within a single episode, contradicting itself and transforming into its own opposite. Episodes comment on one another, and meaning exists not in the storyline, which everybody knows, but in its endless reflections, self-commentary and rhythm*" (Zeldovich).

Orphic Games is not an opera but it was conceived from the start as a work based in, and built around, sound - which might be anything from ambient street noise to pop tunes to snippets of academic contemporary classical. Four of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre's staff composers - Dmitri Kourliandski, Kirill Shirokov, Vladimir Gorkinsky and Fyodor Sofronov - led the students through complex musical training to give them the tools to work with sound on a level of sophistication that they had never encountered.

"*What you want to do is to establish not two-dimensional hearing,*" Kourliandski told an interviewer, "*which is what we're used to in daily life - a flat, wallpaper or carpet-like hearing - but a three-dimensional hearing where you must attune your ear to 'hearing in perspective.'* We do that by way of structuring acoustic time, of breaking down the details of the hearing process, of applying perspective to the act of hearing. Then you start recognizing details within streams of sound. It ceases to be a monolithic, monotonous background and begins to break down into small details, within which you find connections. This is where you begin to apply creative hearing, the kind an author employs. In the arrangement of these accents, you pay attention to sound interactions in space, and you are free to use them as you will. It's the same as if we were to look at an abstract painting in which one person sees people in a field, another sees a lawn, and another sees just a field. The same thing happens with sound, but we use it less often. In fact, this is composition" (Kourliandski, interview).

The simplicity of Stepan Lukyanov's set for *The Golden Ass* gave way to a complex sea of images in Ivan Kochkaryov's designs for *Orphic Games*. At times the stage may resemble an intricate museum or gallery installation. Colored lighting crashes up against video and still image projections cast on performers interacting with one another and props to create breathtaking pictures. A mirror-like floor creates a reflective, reverse reality to all the action, while animated graphic design brings the space to life in unorthodox ways. Icy underworld scenes inhabited by strange, lizard-like individuals alternate with the pristine world of a hip, modern cafe or gallery. Mechanical toys run freely across the floor, spaghetti in tomato sauce imitates the innards of an

individual on a hospital gurney, and meters and meters of tangled red thread remind us not only of the nerve endings that hold together a single individual internally, but also of the usually invisible external ties that bind multiple individuals to one another.

“In spirit, the production is somehow reminiscent of a new season of Westworld: the action is broken down and embellished, balancing between the genres of thriller and show (without ever losing its ritual component). Orphic Games is a journey inside the chaos of human life and the seeming orderliness of death. This journey in a ‘stream’ of 12 performances is looped and cyclical, it has no final destination, just as there is no exit from the uneven white circle that appears on a black backdrop onstage. Inside of it, however, everything is possible, even the absence of death” (Logunova).

It is too early to speak in detail about Yukhananov’s next project, another new processual work based on Andrei Vishnevsky’s sprawling play about *Pinocchio*. Titled *The Mad Angel* when it was published in 2004, it has undergone countless transformations in the 14 years since. Two parts are scheduled to premiere in February 2019, although the whole five-part work will not be ready until summer or fall. Yukhananov has referred to the piece in the press as a *“mystery play”* with elements of a *“meta-opera,”* and to Vishnevsky as *“the first genuinely new processual playwright.”*

Such cryptic descriptions tell us little about what we will encounter when *Pinocchio* opens. But the recent journey that has taken Yukhananov from *The Blue Bird* to *Drillalians* and on to *The Golden Ass* and *Orphic Games* makes it clear that we are bearing present witness to a director who has come into his own, who has finally found the space, the time and the means to realize even his wildest artistic fantasies. Whatever direction that may take him, we can be certain that Yukhananov will continue to forge his own unique, often spectacular, artistic vision that conjoins drama, music, dance, design, installation, literature and everything else at his disposal in a unique hybrid form of theatre for the 21st century.

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