

Vicky Ireland

IMPRESSIONS ON THE MINIFEST

Rostov-On-Don, Russia, XIII International Theatre Festival for Children and Youth MINIFEST, October 13-21, 2018

The first MINIFEST International Theatre Festival was in Rostov-on-Don, Southern Russia in



ROSTOV-ON-DON ACADEMIC YOUTH THEATRE	
«MINIFEST 2018»	
XIII INTERNATIONAL THEATRE FESTIVAL FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH	
OCTOBER 13	
11.00	«POTATO SOUP» 6+ «Agora» Theatre, Belgium 60 min, small venue
18.00	OPENING CEREMONY OF THE MINIFEST XIII
19.00	«TSCHICK» 12+ «Theatre Dortmund», Germany 1h 30 min, big venue
OCTOBER 14	
11.00	«A STORY UPSIDE DOWN» 0+ «La Baracca» Theatre, Italy 35 min, small venue
19.00	«CLOTHING THE NAKED» 16+ «Kazaliste Marina Držića» Theatre, Croatia 80 min, big venue
OCTOBER 15	
11.00	«KASHTANKA» 6+ «Rostov-on-Don Academic Youth Theatre», Russia 1h 30 min, experimental venue
19.00	«HAMLET» 12+ «Pili ja Tuuli» Theatre, Estonia 2h 30 min with intermission, small venue
OCTOBER 16	
11.00	«SONG OF MINES» 12+ «Tout(s)roit Jusqu'à l'AuMains» Theatre, France 60 min, small venue
19.00	«LEFT-HANDER» 12+ «Donetsk Republican Academic Youth Theatre», DPR 3h with intermission, big venue
OCTOBER 17	
11.00	«FANTASTIC CABINET OF PROFESSOR VAKRAMOV» 0+ «KUNOS Circus» Theatre, Switzerland 80 min, small venue
19.00	«THE WAY OF YOUR LIFE» 16+ «Rostov-on-Don Academic Youth Theatre», Russia 1h min with intermission
OCTOBER 18	
11.00	«ROSES IN SALAD» 0+ «Scheda» Theatre, Italy 45 min, experimental venue
14.00	«PLASTIC GARDENS» 0+ «Koreja» Theatre, Italy 55 min, big venue
OCTOBER 19	
14.00	«PEONY PAVILION» 12+ «Youth Experimental Troup of Zhejiang Vocational Art Academy», China 40 min, big venue
19.00	«URSEL» 12+ «Theater an der Parkaue», Germany 45 min, small venue
OCTOBER 20	
16.00	«ANNABERTHACECILIA» 6+ «KREPSKO», Theatre Group, Czech Republic-Finland 45 min, small venue
19.00	«SOCIOPATH/HAMLET» 18+ «Old House» Theatre, Russia 2h, big venue
OCTOBER 21	
16.00	«FRAGILE» 12+ «KREPSKO», Theatre Group, Czech Republic-Finland Two shows: 45 min/15 min, small venue
18.00	CLOSING CEREMONY OF XIII «MINIFEST» 2018 «VASSA» 16+ «Vedogon Theatre», Russia 3 h with two intermissions, big venue

1989. Its aims are to present productions from the most interesting, innovative and progressive theatre companies from all over the world, to share with the city's children, young people and their families.

The last time I visited Rostov-on-Don was October 1996, when I stayed on a large boat, "The Mikhail Sholokhov," on the banks of the beautiful River Don. Along with the UK team of Sarah Argent and Guy Holland I attended the MINIFEST and also the 12th ASSITEJ world Congress, produced by Galina Kolosova, when I represented the UK, and was elected onto the ASSITEJ Executive Committee. On that occasion the only way all the European delegates could get to Rostov, was by hiring a plane from Copenhagen and all travelling together, which we did.

We saw brilliant work, including "Danish Story", - Adolph Shapiro's controversial political take on Han Christian Andersen's, "The Ugly Duckling"; Cheliabinsk Theatre's version of "The Tempest"; Ekaterinburg Theatre's "The Absent Minded Man"; the Korean Street Theatre Troup's, "Hamlet"; the charming Kalmykia Youth Theatre, "Cow, where are you?"; "The Three Sisters" from Rostov-on-Don's Theatre for Young Spectator's and also from there, Vladimir Tchigishev's stunning promenade version of, "Hamlet"!

I have such enthusiastic memories of Rostov and the Russian productions, and the 1996 festival remains one of the highlights of my international touring experiences, so when I met Olga Zaets, the festival's Programmer at the 2016 Young People's Theatre festival in Stockholm, Sweden, I felt hugely privileged to be invited by her to once again be a guest of the MINIFEST.

It was so exciting to find this year's festival all took place within the magnificent Theatre for Young Spectator's, built in 1899, and to find myself wandering backstage and under the

theatre, around the same dressing rooms, where, dressed in cloaks with hoods, we had been led as audience spies in that wonderful, “Hamlet”, twenty two years before.

From being collected from the efficient new airport, to being delivered back to it on our return home, we were treated with real consideration. The festival pack was beautifully put together, with a page of information on each show, plus we were each given a colourful hand-made butterfly badge, the festival’s motif, to identify us. A very nice touch.

The hotel was some way from the theatre but a bus was on hand each day to take us there and bring us back. In between we used the Russian equivalent of Uber.

After a hearty Russian breakfast, (for many in Russia, this is the main meal of the day) we saw one show at 11am, followed by lunch in the theatre café. We then had a break until either 2pm /4pm /6pm or 7pm for a second or third show. As the weather was glorious autumnal sun, we all walked a lot during breaks, especially in the nearby October Revolution Park, in Gorky Park or by the River Don, a favourite promenade for Rostov citizens.



The festival programme included productions from around twelve countries and ranged over age-appropriate content, style and presentation, plus there were literary discussions, panel discussions, (I was part of a panel which discussed, “Theatre Building Bridges”) and laboratory theatre workshops. The guests in attendance were drawn from Russia and beyond.

The theatre has a main proscenium arch stage, a smaller proscenium theatre, and an experimental studio space, all of which were used very well.



Before every show, a large world map was trundled onto the stage by four of the repertory actors dressed as well known Russian comedy characters, who acted a short burlesque with the audience, then pinned the flag of the country of each of the shows onto the map as they happened. Thus the map slowly filled up over the

course of the festival, to hoots and shouts of approval.

Also, in the evening the same group performed a kapustnik, or “cabbage pie” cabaret act, a Russian theatrical tradition. Generally, it is a medley of well-known songs, in which all the lyrics have been changed to celebrate or poke fun at the guests of honour, in this case the performances of that day.

Wikipedia: “In the 18th century, kapustniki referred to “harvesting and processing cabbage at the invitation of one's neighbours,” and it usually involved the women of a village gathering to chop cabbage—which happened to be a long and laborious event, usually during the forty days of Lent. People had to abstain from meat, milk, and other animal products, which made cabbage the common food in meals. After chopping the cabbage up and soaking it in brine, people were able to get much of the nutrition they lacked during winter months. The kapustnik pie was baked using the leftover cabbage from the brining barrel. The women at these gatherings often enjoyed each other's company, talking, gossiping, and singing among other things. As Lent restricted the Russians' diet as well as social activity, kapustniki in the form of variety shows began in the 19th century. Like cabbage pie, a kapustnik showcases its variety of layers that make up a delicious—and entertaining—product. A typical kapustnik may have several scenes, lasting approximately 10 minutes, and is performed by one or more singers or actors with piano accompaniment, or karaoke-style playback. It was not until the early 20th century that the kapustnik became an official form of theatre; the first paying one was staged in 1910 at the Moscow Arts Theatre. This public kapustnik had evolved because the audience was now involved and most productions included satire of current events. These gatherings involved much game-playing and improvised performances for actors and writers to poke fun at one another.”



All I can say is that this was such fun and the theatre's actors were hugely skilled in their improvisations and interpretations of the shows. They also invited audience and guests to play theatre games with them or just “do a turn”, which proved a huge success. These usually took place in the café, over a glass of wine. Kapustniki, a tradition which I really enjoyed.

The repertory system is still alive and well in Russian provincial theatres, and I enjoyed the energy and flamboyant bigness of the evening Russian shows where twenty or more actors filled the stage. This also means that actors of all ages are seen in productions for children,

including highly skilled older performers which we so often lack, and theatres can create productions with eight or more actors to play a whole range of characters. Again, a luxury for most of us, which I've only personally experienced when producing shows in drama schools.

Meanwhile, the festival shows flowed well and were very diverse. There was screened translation for most shows not in Russian, and the audiences were very willing and generous in watching and going along with work in languages they did not understand. Our hostess Olga was amazing in speaking fluently up to five languages, and was there at all occasions with instant translation. We international guests were often accompanied by students studying languages, keen to try out their skills. Our little troupe of students had remarkably good English and their energy and enthusiasm was delightful. This had also been the case in Beijing, China which I have recently visited, where again student volunteers were there to help and were a huge asset as "theatre buddies". We also had a wonderful professional interpreter, Elena Bondarenko.

All the productions were interesting and I especially enjoyed the work of Andrea and Carlotta from La Baracca, Italy and their show, "A Story Upside Down". They have a wonderful rapport with small children, and a simple charming style. Also "Kashtanka", the beloved story by Chekov of a little dog lost, performed by the Rostov-on-Don Academic Youth Theatre. We sat on benches in a curved shape, and when Kashtanka joins the circus, curtains in front were drawn to reveal mirrors and our reflection meant that suddenly we were all sitting in a circus ring! Folk music and clever animal characterisations created a very Russian atmosphere. Also, "Peony Pavilion", where the Experimental Troup of Zhejiang, China, performed with grace and style, and "AnnaBerthaCecilia", "Fragile", and "Polish Tango for Three," from Krespo Theatre Group, Czech Republic-Finland. These three shows had little text and involved puppetry and actors, and stunning, thought-provoking visual ideas. The award winning "Sociopath/Hamlet", from Novosibirsk was electrifying in its delivery, set within a steel cage, with much physical violence, intense music and video imaging. I'm not if I enjoyed it, but it certainly stays in my memory.



I was full of admiration for the festival's media coverage. There was a TV camera filming vox-pops before and after most of the shows, which were shown regularly on local TV throughout the ten days. There was also radio coverage, and several of us went to be interviewed at the local radio station, which was supportive

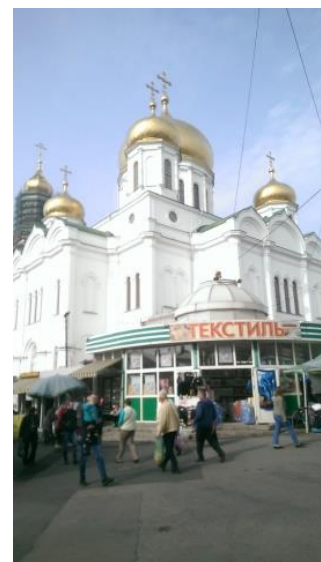


of the arts in general and the festival in particular. I was accompanied to the radio station by the theatre's very glamorous General Director, Karina Serdiuchenko, who was a brilliant spokesperson on behalf of the theatre, all through the festival. No time for being self-conscious or timid, she really sold the situation. A very talented lady with conviction and courage in abundance.

The city of Rostov-on-Don has magnificent buildings from the 18th and 19th centuries, along with beautiful, old, one-story single houses, all gently decaying and



so fragile, they seem held together with cobwebs. It has many well-kept parks full of children's play equipment and in the bright sunshine with trees growing from every nook and cranny, and buildings rolling gracefully down the steep roads to the river, the place was delightful. I enjoyed exploring the city, visiting the excellent Pushkin Fine Arts Museum, the Museum of Local Studies and Cossack history, and the markets, full of beautiful fresh fruit and veg.



The largest market nestles its stalls around the golden domes of the Cathedral of the Nativity of the Virgin.



A stall with a huge variety of potatoes!

I was interested to note Russian people appear fit and eat well, - maybe because they can't afford ready-made take-away food. I saw little or no obesity. Their diet is simple, and I doubt there are many breakfast guests in the UK who munch on great swathes of green herbs – dill and coriander, alongside their Weetabix!

Ladies had been drafted into the theatre café to cook lunch for everyone, and quickly responded to the need for vegetarian meals which many of the guests requested. We had delicious dishes of buckwheat and various beans /chickpeas/ stuffed peppers/ - always cake and always a glass of wine, greatly appreciated.

We were treated to much Russian hospitality, including a coach trip to a local vinery to drink the famous local wine and eat a traditional lunch, and to the lovely home of our hosts Olga and Micha Zaets for cheese and wine and theatre chats, so enjoyable, - plus splendid buffets at the theatre, and much celebratory cake! Cheers!



With guests Joanna Sherman and Michael McGuigan from Bond St Theatre, USA and Adjima Na Patalung, AD of the Bangkok Festival, Thailand.



Wonderful Peking Opera from Zhejiang, China!

The Russian people truly like and invest in their young and I was interested to see so many young children with their families in the theatre, all well-dressed and polite, or in the company of their Babushkas. It seems you don't mess with your Granny! These formidable ladies have

a very important and respected place in raising and looking after young children, and handing on traditions and cultural knowledge. I was privileged to meet two brilliant ones.

All in all it was a successful festival with packed audiences of all ages.

So thank you to Olga Zaets for programming the festival so skilfully, and for your warmth and friendship; to Producer Karina Serdiuchenko and Artistic Director Mischa Zaets for running the festival so well; to Elenyena for her translation; to the staff and actors of the theatre; to the guest companies and many, many more who contributed to its success.

Together you ran an ambitious, highly successful, happy festival, well attended, and well received.

I congratulate you all and here's to the next MINIFEST in 2020!

Meanwhile, President Putin recently announced 2019 will be, "The Year of Theatre", in Russia, so here's to successful national and international productions, collaborations, discussions, exchanges, workshops and meetings.

I hope the UK will be invited to take part.

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London
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A very happy little English person, with her Matryoshka from Rostov-on-Don.

Bolshoye spasibo!