

Bachelor's Thesis (TUAS)  
Degree Program in Performing Arts  
Puppet Theatre Department  
2012

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# EXPRESSING POLITICS THROUGH VISUAL THEATRE

-Analysis of contemporary visual theatre artists from Post-Soviet countries



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BACHELOR'S THESIS | ABSTRACT

UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

Degree Program in Performing Arts | Puppet Theatre

05.06.2012 | 31

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## EXPRESSING POLITICS THROUGH VISUAL THEATRE - Analysis of contemporary visual theatre artists from Post-Soviet countries.

In my thesis I investigate contemporary theatre directors whose works reflect the oppressed life under Soviet Union. I've made an overview about how political theatre has come all the way this far and then concentrated on analysis of two particular performances. Directors of the works- Dmitry Krymov and Andriy Zholdak- and their companies are known for their anarchic, noncommercial and politically charged approach to art. There are all kinds of possibilities and styles to make political theatre and often it is not easy to make categorizations in this sphere. Those particular works focus on a specific epoch in the history and reflect it as naturalistically as possible, without giving any judgments.

I am impressed and interested in how symbols and metaphors can visually express more than words. In my work you can find analysis of this "sign world"- through the prism of performances "Opus #7" and "Lenin Love. Stalin Love". I conclude my work by comparing these two performances that are from so diverse cultural background, yet using similar means and theatrical language. These theatre pieces have proven a point that honest, humane and disclosing stories can awaken fresh thoughts amongst the audience and cause a social change.

Keywords: political theatre, visual theatre, puppetry, Soviet Union, Dmitry Krymov, Andriy Zholdak

OPINNÄYTETYÖ (AMK) | TIIVISTELMÄ

TURUN AMMATTIKORKEAKOULU

Esittävä taide | Nukketeatterin suuntautumisvaihtoehto

05.06.2012 | 31

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## POLITIIKKAN KÄYTTÄMINEN VISUAALISESSA TEATTERISSA - Analyysi visuaalisen nykyteatterin tekijöistä entisen Neuvostoliiton maissa.

Opinnäytetyössäni tutkin nykyteatteriohjaajia, joiden teokset heijastavat sorrettua elämää entisessä Neuvostoliitossa. Olen tehnyt yleikatsauksen poliittisen teatterin matkasta nykypäivään ja keskittynyt kahden eri esityksen analysoimiseen. Esitysten ohjaajat, Dmitry Krymov ja Andriy Zholdak, ja heidän työryhmänsä ovat tunnettuja anarkistisesta, ja poliittisesti haasteellisesta näkökulmastaan taiteeseen. On olemassa monenlaisia tapoja ja mahdollisuuksia tehdä poliittista teatteria, ja siksi alan kategorisoiminen voi olla hankalaa. Nämä kaksi esitystä, joita tutkin, keskittyvät tiettyihin aikakausiin, ja kunnioittavat kyseistä aikaa mahdollisimman naturalistisesti, tuomitsematta.

Olen kiinnostunut ja vaikuttunut siitä, kuinka symbolit ja metaforat voivat kertoa katsojalle enemmän kuin sanat. Opinnäytetyössäni analysoin tätä merkkien maailmaa esityksissä "Opus #7" ja "Lenin Love. Stalin Love.". Päätän opinnäytetyöni vertaamalla näitä kahta kulttuuritaustaltaan erilaista esitystä, joissa kuitenkin on nähtävillä yhtenäinen teatterillinen kieli ja tarkoitus. Nämä esitykset ovat todistaneet kuinka rehelliset ja inhimillisen peittelemättömät tarinat voivat herättää yleisössä tuoreita ajatuksia ja aiheuttaa sosiaalisen muutoksen.

Asiasanat: poliittinen teatteri, visuaalinen teatteri, nukketeatteri, Neuvostoliitto, Dmitry Krymov, Andriy Zholdak

## **CONTENTS**

<b>1 INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2 POLITICAL THEATRE AND AGITPROP</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3 CENSORSHIP AND STALINIST REGIME. THE IDEALOGICAL DEPARTMENT</b>	<b>9</b>
3.1 Opposition	10
<b>4 MEANS OF POLITICAL VISUAL PERFORMANCES</b>	<b>11</b>
4.1 Metaphors and symbols in political theatre	12
4.2 Methods and materials used in political visual theatre	14
<b>5 VISUAL THEATRE DIRECTOR DMITRY KRYMOV</b>	<b>16</b>
5.1 Performance “Opus #7” as an example	16
<b>6 VISUAL THEATRE DIRECTOR ANDRIY ZHOLDAK</b>	<b>21</b>
6.1. Performance “Lenin Love. Stalin Love.” as an example	21
<b>7 COMPARISONS OF KRYMOV AND ZHOLDAK</b>	<b>25</b>
7.1 Symbols in “Opus #7” and “Lenin Love. Stalin Love	26
<b>8 CONCLUSION</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>29</b>

## 1 Introduction

In my work I investigate contemporary visual artists from post-Soviet countries and try to find out how this particular authority has influenced their works. I particularly concentrate on two- Dmitry Krymov and Andriy Zholdak. In my opinion they have made a difference in their society by dissenting the subject of exploitation. Theatre as such has a place in our evolution as a society- these artists have a necessity to create new theatre forms, combined with fine art, video, music- and make a difference through that. It is almost inevitable for artists on 21<sup>st</sup> century not to be conscious about politics, when the society around them defines itself politically conscious. But it certainly is a conscious choice, whether they indicatively use it in their artistic productions.

Making a comparison between directors from different regions and cultures, yet same censure- that helps to understand this topic deeper. There are aspects that these artists have in common and others that are unique and individual. My aim is to investigate possible means for making political theatre by using visual language- pictures, images and effects.

I am interested in artists who have in a way taken risks, brought to daylight things that people are not maybe ready to hear. Their goal has been to reflect the reality – both good and bad- of our society. Artists are the ones who decide what stories get created, seen, and heard by the public. Art reflects the actuality of our time- therefore it is likely to come into conflict with politics. It is not easy to criticize something proficiently- and artists who do that in their works take a serious responsibility. How do these artists manage to combine politics with art and express their statements through creating a performance?

On 21<sup>st</sup> century we might not suffer from harsh censure by authorities- seemingly we all pursue freedom and democracy. But what has it been like in the past and what impacts can still be sensed? In ancient Greek 550 BC theatre was strongly political and social. Commedia dell'arte from 16<sup>th</sup> century delivered political problems to audiences through satire and irony. From Punch and Judy up to Bread and Puppet Theatre- also puppet theatre has had a long history of following political agendas. It has been a long way- and on the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have more styles, mediums and possibilities of making theatre than ever in the history of humankind.

Is it important to take into account the actual events in the society or should an artist be independent from its surroundings? Theatre can be a rather powerful tool- I'm interested whether those performances and acts have managed to cause a social change? How to define the political role in contemporary theatre?

I admire and therefore analyze following artists because they have taken risks in order to express their views- with that often opposing themselves to party in power. Those performances that I analyze in my work are rewarding works, because they have stimulated independent thoughts and opened dialogues in our society. A need for a change and rejection of safe, entertaining, popular theatre- this I find to be the germ for political artists. Contemporary artists are confronted by a major dilemma- they must represent forces, which underlie actuality and are not immediately visible to us (Kuhn and Stiles 2003, 210.)

In the following writing I try to find answers to these questions by concentrating on some, subjectively chosen provocative professional visual theatre artists, who have for me, made a change in their field. My personal goal is to extend the reader's image on how politics can be engaged into contemporary visual theatre.

*The arts are political whether they like it or not* (Schumann, 1985, 14).

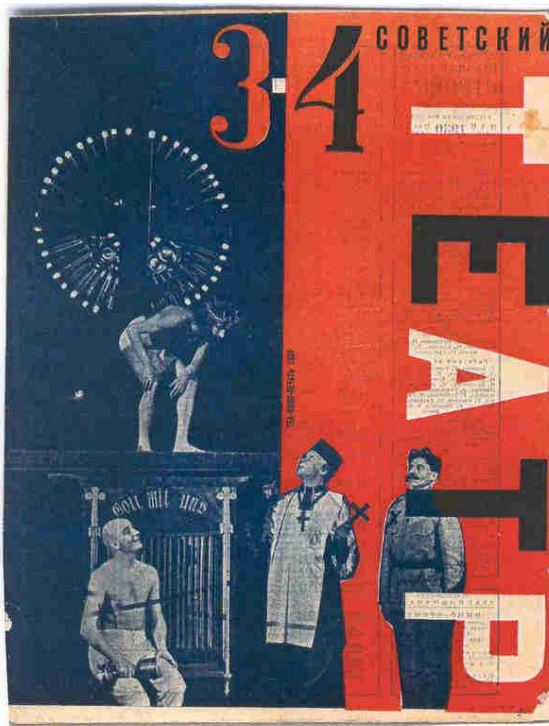
## 2 Political theatre and agitprop

In the history of theatre, there is long tradition of performances addressing issues of current events and central to society itself- encouraging consciousness and social change. Traditionally political theatre has an overt political content, which mostly encourages its audience to take up a position of struggle against a presented injustice or to ally with a particular political viewpoint. Political performance intervenes in social meanings and seeks to persuade an audience to take some specific form of external action.

The starting point for political performances could be considered already in Ancient Greek, where political satire was first performed. Comic poets who performed those satires at the theatres had a considerable influence on public opinion in the Athenian democracy ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political\\_theatre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_theatre), referred 20.05.2012). From this on different styles and approaches have evolved in this field. For example improvisational mask theatre from 16<sup>th</sup> century, Commedia dell'arte, that clearly carried a political message, is considered to be the first entirely professional form of theatre. Commedia dell'arte developed as a response to the political, social and economic crisis in Italy and delivered a political statement through recognizable ridiculous characters. By 17<sup>th</sup> century a character Pulcinella also evolved into a puppet theatre character- inspired from a equivalent character of commedia dell'arte. Then many regional variants of Pulcinella were developed as the character diffused across Europe. Though every region named Pulcinella in their own way, the idea remained the same- criticizing and analyzing politics through a performance. In order to cause a social change Pulcinella expresses the dissatisfaction, to remind and focus lower class people on what is going on (McCormick and Pratasik 1998, 113).

On the 20<sup>th</sup> century with bigger changes in the society, political theatre reached its next level. Together with the socialist movement, the longing for changes reflected also in theatre. Directors like Berthold Brecht, Augusto Boal, Dario Fo, Jerzy Grotowski, Vsevolod Meyerhold, among others, searched for ways to relate with changes in the society and thus expressed their radical views through their performances. Also in puppetry new waves appear- group named “Bread and Puppet” was born as an anti-war movement. Since 1960s up to nowadays they’ve created hundreds of political performances and parades, using huge puppets and masks.

Historically in Soviet Russia, the term political theatre was sometimes referred to as agitprop theatre or simply agitprop. Agitprop is derived from agitation and propaganda and describes stage plays, pamphlets, motion pictures and other art forms with an explicitly political message (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agitprop>, referred 14.04.2012).



Cover of a magazine “Soviet Theatre”

Political message disseminated in agitprop were those of communism, including explanations of the policy of the Communist Party and the Soviet state. There was certain percentage of this kind of performances every year that were demanded/ordered by the Ideological Department. The content of these plays were often based on the idealization of the Soviet Union and its leaders and a disapproval of the Western lifestyle. State-control and censure was now imposed to all the plays, magazines and music pieces. Neither was it an ideal for theatres whose creation was from now organized. Many actors and directors left national theatres- since making propagandistic art was against their principles.

### 3 Censorship and Stalinist regime. The Ideological Department.

Stalin built himself a completely totalitarian state, which meant that government was a single-party dictatorship that controlled every aspect of the lives of its citizens. Citizens must obey the government without question, and critics are silenced. Stalin used propaganda, terror and censorship to force his will on the Soviet people. Censorship is the suppression of speech or other public communication, which is considered objectionable, harmful, sensitive, or inconvenient as determined by a government. In Soviet Union censorship was carried out by the KGB aka Committee for State Security- organization that received its orders from Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics aka USSR. In turn the KGB passed on the order to Glavlit- the official censorship agency that controlled the political content of literature, poetry, arts, theatre, music etc. The Soviet Union engaged in censorship since Lenin believed literature and art could be used for ideological and political purposes. Under the Soviet regime there were a number of organizations responsible for censorship. (www.newworldencyclopedia.org, referred 13.11.2011)

Central Committee's Ideological Department functioned mainly to mold popular opinion. The former not only regulated the media but also issued directives to republic and provincial leaders to administer the mass media and the arts through the various "letters" departments (the media control organs that oversee "letters to the editor" offices), the International Information Department (foreign affairs information overseer), and the Culture Department. Both the central and the local ideology and propaganda departments supervised culture, education, and science. Party leaders at all levels selected editors of newspapers, magazines, and journals within their domains. Since the 1930s, the regime regulated and interpreted artistic expression only through socialist realism (Zubok, 2010, 226).

### 3.1. Opposition

No matter how much The Communist Party tried to make people obey their rules, there always was an opposition in action. Those artists, who chose to portray views that opposed to the regime's artistic standards, experienced shame and denunciation, even though audiences often admired them. Restrictions on what artists worked and where they performed often caused artists to leave the country either of their own accord or through forced exile.

(<http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-12658.html>, referred 25.05.2012)

The wish and aim of these musicians, artists, actors, writers, was just to have a creative freedom and right to discuss social problems openly. But that was not what the Soviet Union needed- they felt threatened by open conversation and couldn't take any risks regarding the steadfast authority figure. I admire the courage of these men who chose to risk their jobs, their freedom, and in some cases their lives to create independent art in an oppressive environment. Without any official approval nor facilities, independent groups started popping up- consisting of different artists, that from now on worked underground. Like that it was still possible to share actual ideas and go into prohibited subjects.

*Under occupation, defeating Soviet censors had been an appealing sport, and the theater became a romanticized venue of collective resistance, providing a “hidden message of hope” that mocked the occupiers and expressed cathartic political dissent. Since there are now essentially no more taboo topics or forbidden subjects, the theater of resistance has given way to a theater of popular entertainment that many feel has been detrimental to individual and collective artistic values. (Patrick Chura, 2008)*

It can be incomprehensible for some- why to bring out performances that analyze this foregone and dark period? It is the 21<sup>st</sup> century and we have moved on and try to find all the time something new and innovative. But maybe it could be taken as a dedication to all the artists and artworks that were banned back then... So actually the rehabilitation period is still lasting in the theatre world of Post-Soviet countries. Indeed, the collapse of USSR in 1991 ended the horrific period where liberty of speech was just a dream beyond reach. Though it was the main goal for the occupied countries for 50 years to break off from Soviet Union, it is never easy to suddenly cope with freedom. For decades artistic community was fighting against a common enemy and opposing itself to one concrete antagonist. And the next minute there is nothing to fight against- you are free to express and say whatever you want.

#### 4 Means of political visual performances

Depending on the main idea, every director has a particular means and style- a frame in which he works. It is hard to say whether political theatre directors always have the same handwriting- probably not. Because visual theatre gives the director infinite possibilities to create a personalized language. Every contemporary theatre group has developed so to say “code” (including hints how

the audience can break the code). Thus the audience nowadays not only has a different world every time they go to see a performance- but also has many different ways how to interpret everything that is happening in this world.

In visual theatre it is common that images that are shown, have got a hidden meaning. Every detail reveals more about the background of the story and some images seen might not get an explanation before the very end of the show. I wouldn't want to claim that the means of visual or political theatre are completely different from classical drama. The main dissimilarity comes probably from the approach of the actors. In classical drama theatre the character and its motivations are shown through psychological acting and mimics of the actor. In visual theatre stage design and objects on stage might speak up instead of the character. So the primary meaning of one object often carries a second layer and sends us another message about the story or the character. I think the essence of theatre and the perspectives of its evolution are universal and apply to all theatre styles- just the approach and interpretations distinct from one another.

#### 4.1 Metaphors and symbols in political theatre

Metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase that ordinarily designates one thing is used to designate another. In theatre, metaphors are mainly used to show the hidden content of what is to be said. Some metaphors aka signs are universal- recognizable for any nation or epoch. And some are changing and can even mean completely different things in distinct times. Anyhow the questions about the nature and purpose of art will never find a final answer, but it is in a constant move and changes.

Metaphors are often used in theatre language and can also express particularly political message. Symbols (especially in visual world) can often be more expressive in visual pictures than in spoken words. But that doesn't mean that

metaphors cannot be presented in words. Poetry, that often is an inspiration source for visual artists, does that obviously. As well as any “political” playwrights through history have managed to hide their beliefs behind a complicated style.

So did artists in Soviet times- they searched any metaphorical language in order to express their thoughts, because they were constantly checked-up on by the government. By the end of 1930s Stalinist regime had evolved an uncompromising policy of censorship. E.g. in 1936-1937 over half of the plays earmarked for production at the main theatres were banned (Martin Banham, 1995, 183.)

This fact clearly influenced artists to search for alternatives. Some managed to evolve a theatrical language that was understood only by the target group. At the same time it had to be indecipherable for the Ideological Department who was in charge of the censorship. The oppressive regime supported works that were ideological and censored those that were not. By using the metaphorical language some artists managed to express their anti-communistic views without getting caught. Often the subjects included religion, inhumanity, anti-socialism, eroticism and racial justice. The communication created between performers and audience could be called iconic- since it based on a set of agreed signs.

It is hard to find out now, how back in these days the common language between artists and the audience was evolved. But it is clear that certain things carried a meaning that only chosen people could codebreak. In contemporary we have no problems with expressing ourselves freely, yet the artists still like to play with the metaphors and create so to say “obstacles” for the audience in order to make the performance more interesting.



Picture can be found from [www.svobodazholdaktheatre.com](http://www.svobodazholdaktheatre.com)

Performance “Month of Love” by Andriy Zholdak

Referred 03.06.2012

#### 4.2. Methods and materials used in political visual theatre

Political theatre cannot be categorized as a method itself, yet it has some tricks that work in favour of conveying its unique message. Then again visual theatre is very opened and constantly changing field in performing arts. Combining those two completely makes sense in my head- having seen performances that have managed to prove the logic of expressing politics through visual theatre. To put it bluntly- it is the art of transforming indignation into action/visual image.

First of all it is the ignorance of not to being faithful to one particular acting method, but open-mindedly searching and discovering common path for working. Political theatre often crosses the borders and searches for extreme solutions. It expresses for example in the aggression of the acting style, which comes from actors who

overcome their traditional acting method- it does not mean just a typical show-off, but carries a meaning and is necessary for this style. In actors work we see a lot of physical effort, which produces a lot of power and energy on stage- therefor is captivating for the spectator. Aggression is actually considered one of the best way of creating a dialogue- I don't think it is 100% true, but I think that aggression does provoke the audience to think.

One more "shocking" thing can be the choice of materials. Since materials used in visual theatre can be absolutely anything- the more surprising and absurd, next to the classical, the better. All kinds of images, in all kinds of sizes and colours can work- it is just the question of combining it all. Scale is definitely one important facet that is played in visual theatre. From something tiny up to absolutely huge- and everything in between those two. Playing with scales is something that Krymov and Zholdak also love and work with a lot.

Another "material " that has been in use in contemporary theatre for the last decade is video art. It has become an inseparable element in visual theatre performances. Video obviously supports it so strongly and most of the times is very reasoned. It helps to expand even more the images that are "supernatural" for the audience and widens our imagination. In some cases video is a good way to add documentary shots, in case the performance bases on true story. Also all kinds of technical elements and special effects work in favour of visual theatre- so the invasion of technology is very much an issue in visual theatre.

*All this leads me to assume that Zholdak's mind is as eclectic as his choice of music, and that his influences come from worlds away from the Russian theatre tradition in which he was trained. This is a world created by the members of the post-communist generation in the former Soviet Union, working in a tradition of non-verbal, imagistic theatre with specially trained performers of all ages. (Noel Witts, 2007)*

## 5 Visual theatre director Dmitry Krymov

Dmitry Krymov (born in Moscow in 1954) is a Russian theatre director, son of famous Russian director Anatoly Efros and the influential theatre critic and historian Natalia Krymova. Krymov's works can be best described as actions or experiments that efface the traditional boundaries between art forms. The artist often uses mixed technique for his expressive pieces that include collage and assemblage (<http://www.ochakoffart.com>, referred 31.03.2012)

Theatre pieces created by Dmitry Kymov are mostly not political (in fact he regards political theatre unsympathetic), but they are always radical in their own way. Here I would like to concentrate on one his works that I do find to have political colouring. It is (basically a wordless) an image play named "Opus #7" that Krymov constructed with the actors of his laboratory in 2008 in Moscow. It consists of two parts that have completely different main line and story, but somehow similar topics and concept.

### 5.1 Opus #7

"Opus # 7" is Dmitry Krymov's grandiose two parts visual performance created in 2008. The design of the whole performance is very clean and mainly in very pure colours- black, white and red. "Opus #7"s first part is a visual and inner expression of the Soviet Jewish experience and a glimpse to the consequences of Holocaust. Krymov says his main idea was to make story dedicated to the genealogy of Jesus Christ. Later he admits, the performance ended up expressing a different key idea- "*Nationality makes no difference*".

"The working title of the first part of the performance is the history of a family in a world where people have been left walking alone. The actors throw buckets of black ink at the wall – the ink drips down, creating silhouettes. The silhouettes

become Jews – ghetto Jews springing from photographer Roman Vishniac’s lost world, hunched, impoverished, troubled and afraid. The painted image changes again – it now contains photographs of actual human beings, miraculously fitting the contours of dripping ink. The image transforms yet again: There is not one person – there are now many, and they replace each other, filling up entire villages and becoming multitudes. We hear whispers with names, letters home, bits and pieces of the vanished, of the disappeared” (Adrian Giurgea, American Theatre, 15.01.2009).



Mikhail Umanets

Picture can be found from [www.krymov.org](http://www.krymov.org)

Referred November 2011

Second part of the performance is a story of Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)- a Russian composer victimized by the Soviet Union. More generally, it describes an artist who survived the dictatorship of Joseph Stalin by getting strength from art, although he had a complex and difficult relationship with the government.

Krymov was inspired by one of his famous works- the seventh symphony aka The Leningrad Symphony. It was composed in 1941, during the II World War and before Stalin started censoring artists harshly. Later, when the Cold War began, the Soviet authorities started to impose a firmer ideological control, demanding a more accessible musical language than some composers were currently using. Since Shostakovich's death his music has been the subject of furious discussions between those holding the Soviet view of the composer as a sincere Communist, and those who view him as a closet dissident. It is interesting that the truth about his real views remain unclear. During his life he expressed extremely different convictions- and for that was treated as "Soviet Russia's most loyal musical son" and at the same time as "traitor of the Communistic regime".

In the performance we see a composer who is scared, but at the same time create- is scared and creates in the middle of the grotesque circus that is happening around him. On one side, a massive red velvet curtain hangs in grand opera-style. In the middle of the stage stands a huge wooden piano what the main actress "manipulates"- climbing on and in it.

Krymov presents the composer as a character drawn from folklore, whose fate and personality represent all artists of the Soviet era. Encouraged, honored and hounded mercilessly by Mother Russia, Shostakovich is increasingly forced to work for the system. Although his creative spirit never dies, he is forced to say things he does not believe (audience hears the sound recordings of Shostakovich's actual public speeches) and write music he might otherwise not

have written (John Freedman, The Moscow Times, 31.10.2008).



Picture can be found from [www.krymov.org](http://www.krymov.org)

Referred November 2011

At one point the surrounding characters on stage build walls around Shostakovich so close that he has no way out. This becomes one of the strongest moment of the show since we entirely sympathise Shostakovich- we see physically the trap he is in and the paralyzed look on the actress's face that becomes so meaningful. After this the actor inside there is replaced by a copy of himself as a puppet. Piano that is the centre partner and inspiration for the composer is presented during the performance in different material forms- wood, tin (metal) and the concert grand piano.

American writer Lawrence Hansen analyzes Shostakovich's music and quotes from a book by Russian journalist and musicologist Solomon Volkov like this: "oppression uncovers our fundamental, primal fear: the destruction of the self by outside forces, the fear of life being pointless and meaningless, the evil that may be found in human beings" (Volkov, 2004, 17).

*I was inspired by a thought that our society rarely loves its geniuses. He notes that he tried to project himself into Shostakovich's life and into the situation he was in as a Soviet artist, who was watched, threatened, and frightened, but who still believed in his own visions. (Krymov, 2008)*



Anna Sinyakina & Mikhail Umanets

Picture can be found from [www.krymov.org](http://www.krymov.org)

Referred in November 2011

## 6 Visual theatre director Andriy Zholdak

Andriy Zholdak (born in Kiev in 1962) is a Ukrainian theatre director known for his radical, provocative and extreme performances. He studied in Moscow in School of Dramatic Arts under famous director Anatoly Vasiliev, having first graduated from School of Arts in Kiev. With his spontaneity and inventiveness Zholdak has staged many performances that broke the principles of academic theatre. The aesthetic style of his works is rather naturalistic and grandiose- so is the acting of the actors.

Mostly Zholdak relies on classical plays, but in this case I analyze a performance created in 2008, which bases on a novel named “Yellow Prince” by Vsyl Barka, performed by Cherkasy State Academic Drama Theatre named Schevchenko in Kiev.

### 6.1. “Lenin Love. Stalin Love.

Zholdak’s performance that I will focus on is based on Vasyl Barka’s novel “Yellow Prince” and tells a story about the Holodomor of 1932-1933- the physical and psychological starvation of the Ukrainian nation during the Stalin regime. The aim of the production was to bring information to the world about the Famine as a pre-planned anti-Ukrainian policy of the Stalinist regime and working out joint actions to prevent genocide and other crimes against humanity.

Any recognition of those frightful events was severely banned in the Soviet Union, so the novel appeared in Ukraine only in 1991, after the country became independent. The play “Lenin Love. Stalin Love” is the first Ukrainian stage production based on the most tragic page of the national history, held to commemorate the millions of victims of the Holodomor and to remember the

political system and government leaders that caused millions to die.  
(<http://www.kyivpost.com/news/guide/sevendays/spec/detail/31291>)

Referred January 2012

Zholdak's performance starts already in the entrance to the theatre. Audience is led inside through a wooden red corridor that gives a very strong impression, reminding a hall of blood and crimes. Walls of this corridor are covered with photos of hundreds of children who suffered from hunger during the famine in concentration camps during 1932-1933.

The performance itself is about the life of one village before and during the invasion of communists. Peaceful life of the villagers changes in a blink of an eye- maybe even too radically and tragically. Stalin's plan called "program of collectivisation", which was supposed to help to satisfy the need for food in Soviet Union, becomes fatal to this village and to the whole nation of Ukraine. 1930s- agriculture is the backbone of the Ukraine, but the scheme of combining the peasants' lands and animals into collective farms statewide impoverishes the region more and more. Bit by bit the situation gets worse and the peasants start hiding the product they have harvested which enforces the authorities use secret police and violence.

All the characters in the play representing the communism are profoundly evil, cruel and inhumane. For me this was a superficial and radical choice of Zholdak- very many people joined the communistic party just in order to manage their own lives somehow and protect their families. Even so we see cruelty and betrayal amongst brothers and sisters. But also we see forgiveness that is almost beyond belief. Extreme commitment to religion means blind devotion to superior authorities.



Picture can be found from:

<http://svobodazholdaktheatre.com>

Referred April 2012

The real story of the play launches with the play's main character's Myron Katranyk's one decision- refusal. He refuses to tell the invading communists where the holy treasure of the church of his village is hidden. Soon he is punished harshly- tied to a cross, drown in a lake and buried randomly in a pit. Not only him, but also every single one who refuse to co-operate with the police is penalized. Katranyk's youngest son is the only one to survive in the entire village and concludes the spectacle by expressing brutally how he feels about Soviet rulers Lenin and Stalin.

This piece proves us that if the story that is told is honest, humane and veracious – the audience identifies itself with it. What is remarkable with this show is its universality- although the story takes place in a certain specific time and place in history (Soviet Union in 1930s), spectator is able to connect to it. I believe it happens also thanks to the use of video that provides the audience with a new angle. Close ups from the faces of the actors helps us understand their emotions more deep and we are instantly drawn into their world. You might not even be familiar with this subject- you still connect to it and recognize the question of very basic human values that are placed in doubt. We are reminded to look inside ourselves and make the decisions together with the characters. How to sort out right from wrong? What is our moral and ethical code? Those question and many more arouse amongst Ukrainian audience, but not only- popularity and furore caused in Russia and Europe has clearly proven the importance of this work.



Picture can be found from:

<http://svobodazholdaktheatre.com>

Referred April 2012

## 7 Comparison of Krymov and Zholdak

Dmitry Krymov and Andriy Zholdak are two contemporary directors who both have unique style and interesting visual conceptions. Besides that they both are known for a have magnificent capability to make the actors to be convictive and expressive. Both of them have an experimental working method, however a strong vision and system- every performance carries a certain recognizable artistic style.

Both of them have been strongly influenced by the deprivations of communism. Most of their lives they've been living in isolated Russia under Stalin and his successors- without any freedom of expression. The big change of polity-collapse of Soviet Union in 1991 gave them a need and possibility to find new visions- since the role of theatre was changing. Therefor the performances I analyse, oppose themselves to something concrete- the cruel side of Soviet Union and its leader Stalin in 1941-1953. This opposition has pushed them to invent interesting metaphors, twists and solutions to forward their message to the audience.

Krymov's speciality that appears in every show are the paintings on huge papers on stage (painted on stage during the performances by the actors), that often tell a parallel story about the characters. Zholdak has a very different element that repetitively appears. In every show there is a stuffed animal, that kind of plays the role of a trickster. It appears as a comment- usually any of the characters on stage doesn't notice or relate to it anyhow. It is directed straight for the audience and the director leaves the audience with many different ways of interpretation.

## 7.1 Symbols in “Opus #7” and “Lenin Love. Stalin Love”

Given performances have not been created in the time of Soviet Union, but to characterize this period Krymov and Zholdak have used similar symbols like the dissident artists used in USSR. Strong weapon that always works in theatre is *contrast*- and contrasts are consciously used in every single work by Krymov and Zholdak. Unspeakable scene that is so joyful and enjoyable for one character and on the other side- such a tragedy to the other.

Krymov chose in his performance “Opus #7” to symbolize Soviet Union as a five meters high puppet- Mother Russia figure, large and dominating in good and bad. Besides this there are bunch of smaller, all the same looking puppets used, that represent the blindly devoted followers of the communistic system. Zholdak shows the authority more flatly- luxurious room with pictures of Lenin and Stalin where the communists live and worship the figures. But a very strong symbol in “Lenin Love. Stalin Love” is a scene in this room where communists eat plentifully while people around them are literally starving to death. Some symbols used in this performance were very strict and obvious- such as the huge photos of Lenin and Stalin on the walls of the communists’ room. Constantly present and watching over everything that is happening.

Barrier is something that was also used in both performances to show the very closeness and predicament situation that the main characters are in. In “Opus #7” the Mother Russia puppet had a hand that suddenly stretched out- many meters long to scroll around the main character to create a symbolic barrier. It visualized physically very precisely the feeling of smothering and harassment that the composer must have felt. Similar to this wall, was a confining glass house of the Katranyk family in Zholdak’s performance- that became somewhat a cage to the starving family who have no escape.

Also these performances are about the complicated relationships- drawn by fear, mendacity and longing for appreciation and freedom. For example in “Opus #7” at first, the big puppet figure nurses little Shostakovich and protects him. But then it reveals that she is not kind at all- Mother Russia turns against the boy and wants to murder him. Later she gives him a medal, but when she pins it to his chest, the pin exits through the composer’s back, turning him into a barely articulate marionette. This is something that Zholdak as well uses in his work- a character being literally manipulated by the dictatorship. Through both plays we could actually see the main character somewhat manipulated and played around with- him being like a puppet with strings.

For me a great similarity was also the atmosphere and feeling that was created. Audience was drawn into both performances so skilfully, that you could feel the *Big Brother* watching you. This patently makes it easy to identify with the characters and partake in their lives- hurt as well as joy.

## 8 Conclusion

The purpose of political theatre in general is to inform and heighten consciousness of the current or past events of the society. Having an urge to create art that carries a social message is not easy- it is full of responsibility and risk. It is a challenge to make theatre that touches the audience emotionally and yet makes us seriously think. Sometimes political performances can be rather radical and therefor not easily tolerable for the audience. But I believe that it is not most important that everybody agree entirely- it is important the audience at least gives it a chance and tries to engage with the other side.

Born in Soviet Union and having spent most of my life living in a Post-Soviet country, has given me a chance to compare the strong difference between East and West. As well as in everyday life, but also see the differences and changes in culture. That gave me a thought and impulse to analyze the subject of political theatre, because sometimes a visual theatre performance can reflect things even better than words. Especially if there is no freedom of speech and artists have to find tricky ways to deliver their thoughts to people- that's the point where incredible things start to happen. The works I analyzed here were not created during Soviet time, but yet described the situation rather well and yet conveyed symbols to us in a similar way as it used to be. In the contemporary world there is no room for censorship, yet we must know and remember the past. The subjects like oppression, artistic freedom and hidden symbols were and always will be close, important and enthralling for me. Now I've found out a lot more about the background and reasons of these themes in the past but also in the contemporary world. I personally did not judge anyone when I jumped into this theme and I will not do it now.

Being fascinated about the thought lead me to a journey full of fantastic theatre pieces and theatre makers with brave thoughts. Being acquainted now to this subject, I find it easier also in my own future works to be braver to give comments about our society. Art is an essential facet for social transformation, but in order to make difference we must have firm belief and courage. And yet- whether a performance is political or not, it must remind us the basic human values and give a meaning to human existence.

*“Art is not a mirror, but a hammer in which to shape reality”*

*Bertolt Brecht*

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- "Opus #7" 2008, performed in Tallinn City Theatre in 2010

Idea, composition and direction by Dmitry Krymov

### In two parts:

#### 1) Genealogy:

Text – Lev Rubinshtein

Composer – Alexander Bakshi

Set Designer – Vera Martynova

Performers – Anna Sinyakina, Maxim Maminov, Mikhail Umanets, Maria Gulik, Natalia Gorchakova, Arkady Kirichenko, Varvara Voetskova

#### 2) Shostakovich:

Music of Dmitry Shostakovich sounds

Puppets – Viktor Platonov

Set Designer - Maria Tregubova

Performers – Anna Sinyakina, Maxim Maminov, Mihail Umanets, Sergey Melkonyan, Maria Gulik, Natalia Gorchakova, Varvara Voetskova

- "Lenin Love. Stalin Love " 2008, performed in Turku City Theatre in 2011

Script, direction, light conception Andriy Zholdak

Scenography and costumes Andriy Zholdak, Tita Dimova

Music Vladimir Klykov

Performers- Aleksandr Kuzmin, Natalya Vigran, Vika Klymkovetska, Vira Klymkovetska, Oleksandr Kuzmenko, Mikhailo Kondratsky, Oleksandr Varun, Kapelka Makar, Sergy Bobrov, Yury Berlinsky, Mykola Kolyadko, Oleg Telyatnyk, Ivan Klymenko, Andry Zhyla, Mikola Glazov, Irina Kindyk, Yulia Donska-Gumenna, Maria Marushchak, Tetyana Kryzhanivska, Lubov Skobel, Tetyana Krasavina