

A MOMENT OF KLIM

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*“condition for the origin of acting
regardless of theatrical form
invariable cognitive creation
of some non-conformity
violating prohibitions
breaking chains
and old laws” (Klim 1991a)*

Abstract: The present article focuses on the notion of intertextuality as put into practice on the Russian stage by the Podval generation (late 1980s). The author documents the aesthetic complexity of the stage imagery employed by this generation in an analysis of performances staged by the most important dramatist and theatre maker of Russian alternative theatre, Klim (born 1952 in Ukraine).

Key words: Klim; Podval generation; privateness of the human condition; zone of patience; intertextuality; alternative theatre.

Klim’s appearance on the Russian (Soviet) theatre scene at the end of the 1980s was perceived as being a break from the theatre of the time.

The generation that studied at drama school in the memorable year of 1982 turned out to contain the last “darlings” of the Soviet system. Anatoly Efros, an outstanding director and artistic leader from the previous decade, was preparing to teach a new course together with Anatoly Vasiliev¹, who had made a powerful statement about nouveau theatre in the late 1970s. Vasiliev persuaded Efros to take on two long-haired youngsters, Boris Yukhananov and Vladimir Klimenko; the latter became known as “Klim”. The two were soon to become the leaders of alternative theatre in the late 1980s.

Throughout the 1980s Russian culture built up a passion for knowledge, open borders, and a revived past. The “code” of the generation encompassed short stories by Borges, the

¹ Anatoly Vasiliev started his career within realistic paradigm, but in 80ties he changed it radically.

musical experiments of Philip Glass and Laurie Anderson, Joseph Brodsky's Nobel speech, Alexander Sokurov's *Mournful Unconcern* and Aleksei German's *My Friend Ivan Lapshin*.

By the mid-1980s, all of this would finally transform into an expectation of new meanings. In 1987 the *Selected Writings of Roland Barthes* were published for the first time in the USSR. In many ways, Barthes shaped the language of the generation, its slang and its icons. The "death of the author" declared by Barthes in the 1960s ignited hope for the destruction of the unshakable USSR 20 years later. Among the "favorite thoughts" of the generation was the concept of "open structure". Intertextuality emerged as a key notion. Naturally, it had very different connotations, but it was implicitly linked to the idea of open borders and the revival of forbidden texts. The idea of a text that "exposes" its secrets was one of the core instruments in critical analysis.

Sophisticated language meant escape from the predominance of simplified communication imparting its meanings without any effort. Distorted meaning provided escape from pressures and existing ideologies and also created a certain immunity towards the ideologies that were to appear later, after the end of Soviet Union. Sophisticated writing, staging and filming meant protecting "the privateness of the human condition," as Brodsky put it in his Nobel lecture in 1987.² For artists, remaining private meant resisting existing success and glory.

It seemed like never before had theatre, painting, literature or the music of an era echoed so vividly its social currents, filled with a longing for change.

The world was being revealed through images. At the end of the decade, Klim coined a term for it—"the golden sphere of the moment" (Klim 1991a)—and it became the mantra of that generation. A linear perception of history (the linear history from Lenin to Brezhnev and others was absurd, full of deceit and deception) and the newly-created gap found resonance with the worlds of Carlos Castaneda, Jorge Luis Borges and Pavel Florensky. It seemed to us that Barthes's definition of art work—as "woven entirely with citations, references, echoes [...] cut across through and through vast stereophony" (Barthes 1987)—was a reference to Anatoly Vasiliev's *Six Characters Looking for an Author* (1987), or Klim's *Three Expectations in a "Landscape"* (1991). Right in front of our eyes, directors would go from being "authors" to being Barthesian "scripters", transitioning from the transmission of "passions, humours, feelings, impressions" to drawing from some endless cultural dictionary.

In Vasiliev's theater, Natalia Kolyakanova and Grigory Gladiy's performance let the audience both sympathize with them and enjoy the aesthetic paradox of their performance; allowing them to experience the improvisation and feel objectified by their aesthetic manipulations. In Boris Yukhananov's project *The Orchard* (1992-1997) (based on Anton Chekhov's drama *Cherry Orchard*), one could indulge in wandering through the canvas of the mythological script for hours, watching Firs' cherry tree transform into an indestructible Vishnu.

In Klim's three-day improvisation *Divine Space of Gogol's Comedy The Government Inspector* (1991-92), Khlestakov would go from Charlie Chaplin slap-stick performance to become Treplyov from *Cherry Orchard*, purveying nostalgia for St. Petersburg followed by

² If art teaches anything (to the artist, in the first place), it is the privateness of the human condition. See: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1987/brodsky-lecture.html

a sudden transformation into the “longing for Moscow”—idiom made famous by Chekhov’s drama the *Three Sisters*. The disembodied plot inspired entirely different associations, transforming a theatrical performance into written text, and from there writing into playwriting. As Barthes wrote “writing ceaselessly posits meaning and ceaselessly yields evaporation” (Barthes 1987). The entire culture of the 1980s was this sort of liberation of ceaselessly evaporating meaning.

The year 1987 was an enigma, and became the focus of an artistic generation, which imposed its own aesthetic dictate over a decade, promising to give rise to a free, masterful and diverse theatre form, to a generation which eventually dispersed and cleared the way for a new beginning in the 1990s. It is no mere chance that the Creative Studios (the institution set up by the Union of Theatre Makers of Russia) and Anatoly Vasiliev’s School of Dramatic Art were both founded in 1987 and that “Mitin Zhurnal” ([Mitya’s Magazine], the intellectual centre of new texts and criticism), which published Joseph Brodsky’s Nobel lecture, came into existence in this year.

Theater is the zone of infinite patience. A poet’s inspiration is his ability of self-sacrifice, and conducting himself in a special light—a rare state that defines the Divine in each of us. Everything that turns becomes collective in theater art. The possibility of such occurrence has faded tragically and makes waiting almost unbearable and our chances not only poor but also vain... The aim is entering the “Zone of Existence”, not its interpretation (Klim 1991b).

The first Klim project I ever saw was called *Three Expectations in a “Landscape”* by Harold Pinter staged in the Pushkin Theatre as part of the first Creative Studios Festival in 1990. It was in a way a ticking time bomb: a three-day theatre performance which had no desire to influence, yet induced unbelievable activity among the spectators, including harsh rejections when the show was abruptly described as gibberish, mumbo jumbo and delirious. As far as the last of these is concerned, the truth is, the actors sometimes talked so quietly it was as if they were utterly indifferent to whether the lines were clear or connected.

Indeed the script was of interest to a completely different paradigm. The script of the three plays by Pinter was turned into a continuous flow that had no beginning and no end and was obviously lacking content. In his *Expectations* Klim hypothesized and postulated performers, who knew no stability, stillness, and nothing of stability provided once and for all; or for that matter of the permanent shaping of theatre.

His actors, whom he inherited from Vladimir Mirzoev, lived ascetic and sacrificial lives for seven years, incarnating Klim’s maximalist demands on the people he worked with. Being part of the “Creative Studios”, Klim’s workshop had to survive on the symbolic pay the Soviet state gave them. As the rest of the companies were being closed one by one, and the Meyerhold Center (the heir to “Creative Studios”) no longer acted as a source of funding, Klim’s actors were turning into sorts of disembodied spirits and ghosts. At first, life in the Podval (meaning basement, or underground) was very strict, with no time for late night parties. Training sessions started in the morning, lasted for a few hours and then seamlessly evolved into rehearsals. Rehearsals then became performances—life in the Podval never stopped.

The only person willing and able to support the Workshop for all these years was the German director Roberto Ciulli and his Theater an der Ruhr. After the festival in Mülheim



Photo 1. Klim's Podval

(1993), where Klim's company performed *The Persians* (1993), Ciulli produced the third episode of the *Indo-European Project—Hamlet* (1994), financing it entirely, thus granting the Podval another year of life. But it would no longer be the same. Training sessions lasted till the very end, and even when almost all the actors had gone or were driven out by Klim, he would go on, sometimes alone. In the intervals the actors tried to stave off their hunger with bread and butter. At the end of 1994 Klim moved to St. Petersburg.

Let us, however, return to the golden times of the Podval. The name of Klim's performance, *Three Expectations in a "Landscape"*, contained the key as to what was expected of the spectators: they had to open up, let the fluid structure pass through them, feel the "golden sphere of the moment", live it as if it were the most unbelievable and unforgettable experience of their lives.

Klim was the one to formulate more accurately than anyone the key problem of our time: that what has been called interpretation, or director's reading, is in fact the autocratic nature of totalitarian theatre, an act of violence, or—if we put it in Barthesian language—stop in the



Photo 2. The dervish rotations in *The Persians*- choir

“flow of meaning”. Klim believed that a director should only set up the stage for such a flow! He called himself the guard! The guard of the flow...

Performances moved from theatrical space to the space of mental perception, before taking final shape. Yukhananov’s experiments in his Individual Directing Workshop and Klim’s performances in the Srednekaretny podval were essentially the first signs of freedom. Young theatre critics were studying post-structuralism through the works of Roland Barthes, and through Klim’s performances that greatly resembled the never-ending novels of Marcel Proust. Characters in Klim’s theatre would be stripped of their personalities in a flash. Actors, parading before us with the cold-bloodedness of catwalk models, taught us to see things differently, they would reset our crystalline lens: they were completely neutral towards the script and the protagonists. Khlestakov could no longer be described, having dissolved in the impersonal “space of the divine comedy”. The hierarchy was destroyed and people in the audience were given the freedom to observe and interpret meanings, sharing them with actors as equals. The aesthetic revolution was accomplished. The theatre was no longer just a visual art, but it had been transformed into the art of sound and visionary vibrations, the art of time, rather than space.

After his first works in the Workshop—*Probability B* (1989), *Three Expectations in a “Landscape”*, and the *Divine Space in Gogol’s Comedy “The Government Inspector”* (1991-92), Klim started his ambitious *Indo-European Project* in four parts: *North – The Tale of Igor’s Campaign* (1992), *South – The Persians* (1993), *West – Hamlet* (1994), and *East – Upanishads* (never made). *The Tale...* and *The Persians* had to be sung. And if Klim’s



Photo 3. The Queen's appearance in *The Persians*

previous works were constructed as dramatic improvisations, with this project he took a step towards vocal improvisation, the individual exploration of universal archetypes. According to Klim, theatre is an anthropological investigation.

This project led Klim to the idea of creating authentic translations, or unique plays based on classical texts. Vyacheslav Ivanov's (the great Silver Age³ poet and philosopher) translation of *The Persians*, where antiquity is transferred to the ancient Slavic context, provided him with the first impetus: "All texts have to be transformed by the force of native language. They need to be planted into native soil and sprouted anew"⁴ This gave the actors the chance to play freely with Middle Eastern, Slavic and Gregorian chants and musical canons. Klim called this approach to translation "seed sprouting":

So *Hamlet* (1994) was rewritten. Then followed *Richard III* (1997) and *Juliet and her Romeo* (1999); although they were never staged. Klim transferred the principle of authorless vagabond theatre, with varying plots, to his creative work, and ever since he has been rewriting all the texts he staged, or intended to stage. Written in *verse libre*, these translations keep the poetic texture of speech, and are a special form of philosophising through poetry.

Klim's "St. Petersburg Period" was an attempt to adapt his entire lab experience to the realia of a state theatre. The staging of Eugene O'Neill's *Moon for the Misbegotten* (1996) in the Liteyni Theatre was probably his most successful attempt. Without the unique space

³ Silver Age – Serebrajannyj vek (Russian literary movement at the beginning of the 20th century).

⁴ Vjatcheslav Ivanov's translation of "The Persians" by Aeschylus.

provided by Podval—with its big pillar in the middle hiding fragments of the performance from the audience and a mirror in the back reflecting those fragments and reclaiming their right to be seen again—at his disposal, Klim moved the spectators to the stage so they would see not only the actors but also the faces of other people in the audience, and the outlines of the hall. Klim's spatial initiative has a specific meaning: it addresses those theatre eras that allowed the viewers' eyes to wander between starry skies, walls and the faces of the people around them, giving the show the role of a festive frame for all scramble.

Klim's minimalistic sketch based on O'Neill's drama begins in a dense predawn silence. A true master of the use of soft and diffused lighting, he turns the story of broken love into a sorrowful and tender sonata of solitude and melancholy. Klim taught the national stage to listen to the silence, to look at the eternal image through the moonlight and through cigarette smoke. Four people on stage tell each other stories of drinking, fears, Freudian complexes and sudden anger—all that life "flesh" that O'Neill tried to convey—turn into touching comic masks, with life continuing to flow by their side perfect in content, depression, tenderness, pain of lost perfection, and perfect love. Words become lost in the semi-darkness and we can barely see the silhouettes of the construction tools, ready to measure something that is yet to be constructed and invisible to the unaided eye.

"Retreat in the moonlight, retreat far away," Yelena Gromova would repeat in the production of *Three Expectations in a "Landscape"*. The nature of Klim's theatre was defined by distance, cold moonlight glowing between sensuality and neutrality, meditation, and pain. It is theatre in which a person with all his personal and even intimate experience discovers his inner ritual creature, an empty vessel for capturing the Universe. "There is empyrean above me. I can hear waves breaking".⁵

In the 2000s all the creators and ideologists of the "new theatre" (the authors of "Teatr. doc", the "Territoria" Festival and their young disciples) tried to prove that aesthetic experiences were public. This is why they were so valued by the Sixties generation, who could well have been their grandmothers and grandfathers, with power over the theatre world, who had at some point rejected the "rabid aestheticism" of the previous generation.

The new generation started preaching social optimism and Yuppie pragmatism—and occasionally it was quite passionate. Not only temper but a special instinct urged them to "influence minds", "stir up consciousness", "appeal to a fair order of universe", and "call on sleeping society to rise up". At the same time they developed relations with the government, turning into cultural oligarchs and forming shadow cabinets. Since the 1930s relations between theatre intellectuals and state authorities have never been closer. Mr. Viacheslav Surkov was behind many of the more or the less pompous projects started by these theatre oligarchs, while Kirill Serebrennikov staged his novel *Okolonolya [Close to Zero]* (2011) in the Chekhov Moscow Arts Theatre. That is the result of developing a "socially responsible" theatre, which the new generation of directors opposes to the "aesthetic" escapist nature of the "Creative studios" and the entire 1980s generation.

⁵ The quote is from the Russian translation (as remembered) of Harold Pinter's original: "Above me, the mighty firmament, the stars in their courses glittering against a cloudless sky... All our offices are high above sea level, for up in the empyrean the air is purer and thinner and conducive to la-la" (Pinter 1994).

Naturally, the linguistic and stylistic “complexity” of the 1980s together with the personal integrity of its prophets appears to many as awkward anachronism in the present-day era of straight-forward pragmatism. Klim “emigrated” into the scripts and into drama.⁶ Monologues and dialogues, which he had written from 1994 till now, invite one on a trip towards dangerous freedom, where actors and spectators are alone with each other and by themselves, seeing themselves from a new and unexplored angle. These texts examine the laws regulating the energy and the flow of theatre speech. Klim gives the theatre back its right to be extreme, frank and totally theatrical. Today he seems a little out of place with his strange unwillingness to accept the obsession with the simplicity and nature typical of the new generation of directors and actors. As a representative of the Podval generation, Klim rejects the naturalism. Consequently, compared to the contemporary mainstream, his theatre seems unnatural: flow of his performances is slow, the changes perceived as sudden. In a way he reflects large cosmic movements of nature – and more than in everyday life, he is interested in person struck with desperation or love.

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⁶ Although unpublished, Klim's plays attain a high degree of autonomy. Since they might be of interest in the context of world theatre, we list more of them here:

- 1998 – «Активная сторона бесконечности», based on Carlos Castaneda
 1999 – «Джульетта и ее Ромео»
 1999 – «Начальная школа драматического диалога»
 2001 – «Альцест», based on Molière „*Le Misanthrope*“ (festival NET)
 2003 – ДЕМЕТРИЙ материал: «ТЕМНЫЕ ДНИ», не историческая хроника на тему Шиллера «ДИМИТРИЙ»
 2004 – «Отчего люди не летают...», based on Alexander Ostrovski's «Гроза», (theatre festival «Балтийский дом»)
 2005 – «7 days with the Idiot», based on Dostoyevskiy's novel
 2005 – «Кабаре «Бухенвальд»»
 2006 – «Девочка и спички»
 2009 – «Злой спектакль»
 2012 – «Анна Каренина»