

# MOSCOW SUN

Paul Harman has a three year bursary from Arts Council England to explore international relationships for UK theatres for young audiences. He was invited to Moscow for an international conference on Children's Theatre festivals in Europe at the 2008 Big Break Festival.

It did not snow as it should in early November. The half term break saw bright sun gleaming on the golden domes of Moscow's many churches. Walking the streets of this huge city was a great pleasure, filled as it is with a riotous chaos of buildings in many styles and on many scales, from the tiny reconstructed 16<sup>th</sup> Century Kazan cathedral, smaller than the most modest English parish church, to the vast hotels and office blocks that scream oil and gas money from their tasteless, post-modern bulk. Russia's charming 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century version of classical style, the individual two and three storey mansions painted in bold colours with white details, are still there, jostling with Stalin's wedding cake skyscrapers and the modern boxes. The famous Metro stations are jaw-droppingly vast and lavishly decorated – the newer ones still celebrating science, industry – and the arts.

Above ground, every square has a bronze statue, usually of a poet or writer. Every street, it seems, has a theatre. But the secret life of central Moscow, mostly built in great blocks with towering facades facing wide avenues, bleak in the winter months, lies in behind, in the pereuloks, the side streets and internal courtyards. That is where new cultural businesses – including studio theatres – flourish in basements and odd corners. [Theatre Praktika](#), organiser of [Big Break](#) since 2007, is a lively model of the new enterprise, running festivals and workshops, producing and presenting smaller shows to niche audiences. The larger institutional theatres also have new studios, sometimes high up in the roof or in a converted office or rehearsal room.

## TOP DOWN

My experience across Eastern Europe of a top heavy structure of big companies, huge buildings and heavy overheads is of course repeated in Russia, but the shows selected for **Big Break 2008** were almost universally small in scale, playful in approach, warm in the effort to make contact with young audiences. The least successful examples, including some performed by young people, showed clear evidence of standard Russian practice: writer and director imposing ideas, styles and concepts upon talented and – in the case of the adults - highly trained, mature actors.

Anatoly Praudin's company presented **House at Pooh Corner**, a three hour epic in which each character is a fully developed and complex adult. It is Chekhov for Juniors with a difference: the young audience is taken seriously and expected to cope with weird adult behaviour. The framework linking the stories is of a community of human adults, led by the dreamy and imaginative middle-aged Pooh, the archetypal Russian writer, creating spaces and settings from a stage full of bricks, fabric lengths, and ladders. At one moment the teenage Roo insists of having her mother remove the cumbersome tail part of her costume so she is free to climb a tree. Eeyore is a disillusioned 40-something woman, frustrated by life all round, typical of the Russian situation in which women are supposed to hold everything together while the men philosophise. Rabbit is the irresponsible, selfish modern businessman. Piglet transforms from a pampered adolescent in a pink frock to a hunk in a sailor suit – pursued by Kanga, elegant mother of Roo. The performances are clear, open, detailed and warm.

Maly Theatre Novgorod is in the hands of a younger team, keen to develop new styles of puppetry and object theatre at the small scale. Their show with paper puppets was delightful if a bit overplayed for my taste. Moscow Arts Theatre committed massive resources to a modern version of a Russian classic folk tale, the **Little Hump-backed Horse**. You could call it a Russian version of our traditional panto, but the scale and the production values are far superior. The structure is of the journey made by a simple fool, led by the magical horse through fantasy lands, under the sea, to the Emperor's palace etc. A technically superb company of 40 actors able to play a vast range of characters in contrasting styles, dance, sing and tumble, made for a delightful family show. The lively text is well crafted with jokes for all ages by the Brothers Presnyakov, among the best writers in Russia today. Gogol's classic story **The Nose** was reportedly another fine piece of acting and direction from the oldest dedicated company in Russia, Moscow Theatre of the Young Spectator.

The foreign companies from Sweden, Switzerland and Denmark offered typically worthy western European shows, a little dated, well presented but lacking the spark of the best Russian work. By all accounts, most of the other shows by established Russian companies were dutiful, condescending relics, giving the impression of having been created in the 1950's and not rehearsed since.

The worst show I saw was by AKHE, Engineering Theatre, supposedly renowned for off the wall clowning. What we got was just that, a series of clowning numbers cobbled together and interspersed with kids from the audience telling horror stories. Good mime artists with nothing important to say.

## RENEWAL?

The aim of the festival was to explore, among other things, the premise that established theatre for children is dead and only children doing theatre or artists from the so-called adult theatre can provide artistic renewal. On the evidence, people dedicated to young audiences do it better, provided they have the extra resources which are needed. Standards in Russian theatre are high because of long and rigorous training for actors, directors and other artists and because of the strength of a tradition that produced Stanislavsky and Chekhov, Meyerhold and a host of modern masters of the craft, from Dodin and Liubimov to Korogodsky, Shapiro and Praudin.

Russia needs to see the best writing and small scale work for younger children from the UK. Our own tradition is at its best in these areas. Many Russians attending the seminar on European festivals for young audiences were also frustrated that a wider range of topics and approaches was not addressed – street theatre, drama for development, youth theatre and theatre made with problem kids, dance and music theatre.

Russia has a civilisation of its own; deep, rich and radical. Culture mattered enough to send artists to prison in times gone by. It still matters and has a quite different social role than in most of Western Europe. UK theatre makers for young audiences have probably more in common with colleagues in Russia than our peers in many Western European countries. Get beyond the barrier of the language, as you can with so many younger people, get off the main street, travel to other cities and you will find many theatres keen to build international partnerships in which the skills and experience on both sides can be generously shared.

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Picture postcard weather for a visit to the Kremlin.



Praktika Theatre has a smart new basement theatre well signed from this side street in the central Moscow theatre district.



ASSITEJ President Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Schneider in seminar mode. The European Festivals Research Project looked at children's theatre festivals for the first time.



Krylov is Russia's writer of fables in the tradition of Aesop and La Fontaine. Several of these bronze reliefs are in a delightful park surrounding the Patriarch's Pond in Central Moscow, not far from Praktika Theatre.



Yuri Long-Arm, the founder of Moscow. An Anglo-Saxon apparently, trading along Russia's river system from the Baltic to the Black Sea a thousand years ago.



Messages, posters and informal advertisements are a common feature of the Moscow street scene.



Great Picture. Pity about the show! AKHE did good clowning numbers but **Candy Wrapper Kit** was not a fully developed show for a young audience.