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Russian and British “new drama” of the turn of the 21st century: General concepts, meanings, and performances

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Abstract. At the turn of the 21st century, Russian “new drama” manifests the British playwright tradition (mainly of the British Royal Court Theater). Choosing the most relevant themes, Russian and British playwrights strive not just to shock and challenge the audience with the cruelty of what is happening on the stage, but to make the reader/viewer tackle the problems, understand the characters who are often imperfect and marginalized humans. These texts form a single artistic space that integrates various shades of pain, fear, and suffering having no geographical, political, social, and humanitarian borders. Thus, destroying the criteria of rationality, demonstrating the infinite nightmare of everyday life, the British and Russian playwrights make some international project. After the rise that characterized the British theater in the 1950s and 1960s, there came a period of some passive interest to the theater culture in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, at the turn of the 21st century, a new generation of playwrights came to literature. Mark Ravenhill (1966), Sarah Kane (1971–1999), Anthony Neilson (1967), Philip Ridley (1964), Martin McDonagh (1970), Joe Penhall (1967) manifested the artistic principles of the so-called “angry young people” and the traditions of Antonin Artaud’s “Theatre of Cruelty”. Antonin Artaud saw the possibility of human liberation by magnifying cruelty and placing it in the foreground in the existing picture of the world. Freedom of choice and complete disregard for morality and traditional values lead to violence, and a person becomes a professional buyer or seller, a victim or an executioner. In the world where the main purpose of life is buying and selling, a person lives according to the laws of free market and can be both a

buyer and a commodity. Human cruelty is determined by the desire to humiliate others, which can lead to serious consequences. The central theme of Mark Ravenhill's drama is the idea of consumerism – a distorted value system that has become dominant in a consumer society with a pronounced market philosophy. In the universe of infinite buying and selling, even events related to the death of people turn into commodity. As for the Russian “new drama” with its everyday nightmares and “communicative violence” (the term introduced by Mark Lipovetsky), we rather mean an artistic phenomenon that is characteristic of the global social and cultural situation at the turn of the millennium – the period of destructing one society and creating another. The Russian audience has never been jaded, cynical, and bored. Thus, rather offensive and unjustifiably cruel drama images perform the primary function of depicting the surrounding reality, which has become too familiar, and therefore often not properly realized. Consequently, the Russian playwrights of the turn of the 21st century aim to make the person with locked consciousness, the one, who tries not to notice the horrors of reality, “look back in anger”.

Keywords: “new drama”, communication, ritual, context, symbolic, discourse, performance

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Научная статья

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Российская и британская «новая драма» рубежа XX–XXI вв.: главные концепты, смыслы и представления

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Аннотация. Русская «новая драма» рубежа XX–XXI вв. тесно связана с британской драматургической традицией. Выбирая актуальные те-

мы, российские и британские драматурги стремятся не просто шокировать и бросить вызов жестокостью происходящего на сцене, а заставить читателя разобраться в проблемах, понять героев, часто несовершенных и отверженных людей. Эти тексты образуют единое художественное пространство, не имеющее географических, социальных и гуманитарных границ.

Ключевые слова: «новая драма», коммуникация, ритуал, контекст, символика, представление.

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Russian “new drama” of the turn of the 21st century, as integrated into the global artistic space and manifesting the traditions of the British Royal Court Theater, is one of the representative discussion points in the culture of the “paradigmatic shift” era. Mark Lipovsky notes that “the authenticity of the ‘new drama’ and the theater of the 1990s – early 2000s associates itself with the desire to form an identity ‘here’ and ‘now’, either by analyzing clearly defined social groups, or by performing communication between the stage and the audience” [1. P. 14–15]. At present, Russian “new drama” is becoming an object of active research, thus turning into a new cultural paradigm.

As a rule, “mainstream new drama” relies on hypernaturalism. It is often interpreted as a result of the influence of the English In-Yer-Face Theatre. <...> In-Yer-Face Theatre has revived the tradition of the British social theatre, primarily based on the concept of the “angry young people” of the 1960s and John Osborne heritage. Moreover, the Theatre of the Absurd greatly contributed to the formation of the “new drama” principles through the reference to violence scenes, brought to the stage in order to blow up the aesthetics of theatrical entertainment and escape from the reality [1. P. 16–17].

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the UK Theater evidently concentrates on the problem of social violence. At the turn of the new millennium, the theatre with its tragic perception searches for innovative scenic forms. Aleks Sierz, in the work *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2000), notes that “the 90-s were a turbulent and violent decade. Day after day, mass media broadcast news on wars and murders, terrorist

bombings, ethnic cleansing, mass fatal cases, that leave an indelible imprint on public consciousness” [2. P. 206].

A playwright aims to produce an aggressive influence on the recipient, which would allow him to realize the tragedy of human existence. If the generation of British playwrights of the 1950s entered the history of literature as a generation of “angry young people”, the works of the playwrights of the turn of the 21st century got the name “In-Yer-Face Theater”: “Such drama often shocks or amazes, because it is new in tone or structure, and because it is bolder and more innovative than the one the audience is accustomed to” [2. P. 206]. In the article “The Theatre of Shock Therapy” (2016), Vera Shamina characterizes “In-Yer-Face Theatre” as a shock strategy “which aims to bring the viewer off balance and force a hard look at things that we usually try to avoid or ignore because of their ugliness, taboo nature, and even morbidity” [3. P. 170].

One of the most prominent playwrights belonging to the “aggressive theater” is Mark Ravenhill. In UK he became one of the leaders of this movement. The theme of cruelty is in the heart of Ravenhill’s early plays. There we can trace that unsocialized characters hate the world around them (*Citizenship*, 2006; *Some Explicit Polaroids*, 1999), nobody sympathizes with anyone (*Totally Over You*, 2003), all the characters terrorize each other by torturing and destroying those who are weaker (*A Handbag*, 1998). Thus, for Ravenhill the world becomes so mad and merciless that the characters of his plays have no future. They are hopeless and desperate. Along with Ravenhill, the representatives of this movement are Sarah Kane, Joe Penhall, Anthony Nielsen, Kevin Eliot, and Martin McDonagh. The comparison with the “angry young people” becomes regular. Yet, in the 2000s, the social situation was more critical, so that the degree of cruelty in the “new drama” became illustrative of the contemporary life challenges. The characters of Ravenhill’s plays belong to the postmodern period. They are marginal and their relationships are completely spontaneous, unions are random and short-lived, and the dialogues are often meaningless: “Ravenhill’s drama implies postmodernism trends not as a theatrical practice, but as a proposal for discussion” [4. P. 27].

Freedom of choice and complete disregard for morality and traditional values lead to violence, and a person becomes a professional buyer or seller, a victim or an executioner. In the world where the main purpose of life is buying and selling, a person lives according to the laws of free

market and can be both a buyer and a commodity. Human cruelty is determined by the desire to humiliate others, which can lead to serious consequences: “In the absence of a great narrative, it is difficult for the characters to grow morally, since they have no role models. Nevertheless, Mark Ravenhill insists that ‘It is the audience that does the moral choice’ ” [5. P. 6].

Ravenhill’s play *Product* (2005) was staged at Moscow Praktika Theater (directed by Alexander Vartanov). This play is one of the most shocking texts of the playwright:

The topicality of the play grows dramatically as it appeals to the problem of terrorism. After September 11, 2001 social life acquires a different dimension. The play is a real theatrical monologue of the character, the producer, who seeks to benefit greatly from the “global challenges” of the day. < ... > While producing a feature film, marketing strategies and principles of “product promotion” become crucial. Mark Ravenhill sends a clear message that today terrifying and shocking data can become a well-selling product. The wild fantasies of a movie producer create a blockbuster, depicting a love story of a young terrorist from an Eastern country and a very successful girl with a “posh apartment in London”. Addressing the future leading actress, the Hollywood producer plans to make a truly striking film [6. P. 229].

The central theme of Ravenhill’s drama is the idea of consumerism – a distorted value system that has become dominant in a consumer society with a pronounced market philosophy. In the universe of infinite buying and selling, even events related to the death of people turn into commodity: “Thank you for listening. Thank you for coming here. It’s been a privilege to tell the story. And, you know, later if you want to go back to your, you know, manager and agent and PR and your people and, you know, take the piss, use the script to ... then fine, fine, because at least I’ve told you, I have told you” [7. P. 653–657]. After reading the play, there arises an impression that the story of the film producer James is not a figment of his imagination. The theme of violence proceeds in other texts by Ravenhill: “With the degree of generalization and artistic convention introduced by the playwright, the cycle of one-act plays *Shoot / Get Treasure / Repeat* (2007) became a radical turn to the political theater” [6. P. 230]. This cycle was also staged in Russia. The play *Paradise Lost* embodies the confrontation of two systems and two cultures. The

people of one culture hate the people of another, and it pushes them to cruelty and violence. The main character of *Paradise Lost* believes that her neighbor is evil only because she belongs to a different ethnic group and speaks an incomprehensible language. In *Candid*, another play in the cycle, the author highlights the danger of terrorism spread within the same society and people of the same culture. The heroine of the play, guided by “environmental” priorities, shoots her relatives in a restaurant at the celebration of her own birthday: “For the planet to breathe freely, the girl begins ‘cleansing’ with her family <...>, and finally dies at the end of the gory second act” [6. P. 239]. Thus, terrorism is one of the key themes in Ravenhill’s drama as well as in the British drama in general. Comparing Ravenhill’s plays to plays written by representatives of the Russian “new drama” (*The Heat* (2011) by Natalia Moshina, *The Terrorism* (2002) by Oleg and Vladimir Presnyakov) allows us to consider these works as a single body of anti-terrorist texts belonging to the “angry young people” (a new generation of the so-called “the angered”).

In Vladimir and Oleg Presnyakov’s plays, “all the characters experience an identity crisis” [8. P. 252], while the attempts of the unnamed characters to find themselves in the world of absolute absurdity end misery. In this way, the characters resort to violence in order to identify themselves. Lipovetsky notes: “The performance of violence (or theatrical demonstration of readiness to commit a violent act) functions as a universal simulacrum: it replaces professional ethics, the desire for freedom, love, a sense of national supremacy, and finally, just vitality” [8. P. 264]. The idea of cruelty in *The Terrorism* becomes dominant. The existence of a person in the world relates to violence and cruelty serves as a guide to action. All actions of the characters imply voluntary or involuntary violence. Those who suffer from the cruelty of others become ruthless themselves. Thus, the Passenger, who is threatened with a terrorist attack at the beginning of the play, becomes responsible for the death of people in the final. The child, who does not care about the consequences of his actions, tries to flee from persecution, presses the bell button and, thus, involuntarily provokes an explosion in a gas-filled apartment. The lover of the Passenger’s wife, wishing to spice up the love game, uses the methods of a professional terrorist and jeopardizes his beloved. “Law-abiding” elderly women, passing the time sitting on a bench near the entrance door, discuss how to kill their neighbor with impunity: “This is a

war, you know! It’s time to move from preventive measures to ground actions! The one who dares will win!” [9. P. 281].

In the finale of *The Terrorism*, the Passenger finds himself alone in a cabin of a plane and falls into a different dimension. He listens to the answering machine, knowing that neither the phone nor the apartment itself exist anymore after the explosion. The voice that seems to come from the netherworld, the plane that either did not take off or has already crashed (the theme of the crash) – all these are the possible end of the world signs. Thus, the apocalypse in the play by Vladimir and Oleg Presnyakov is not a global earthquake or a war of the worlds. It is a total terror and overwhelming cruelty: “Violence weaves all the plot lines of the play together, so that the causes and effects can no longer be separated from each other. Everyone imitates everyone, takes revenge for something, and ends up being victim to their own violence” [8. P. 260].

In Vladimir and Oleg Presnyakov’s plays (*Set-2, The Terrorism, Europe-Asia, The Flooring, The Arrival of the Body, Playing the Victim*), one can trace the exact and immediate impact of Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, as well as the dominating loneliness and insecurity motifs. Human existence turns into a struggle for survival, for the right to attack, for the ability to hurt:

Violence forms the social fabric. It creates the unity of the “social organisms”, social ties which seemed to unravel in the late Soviet years <...>. Presnyakovs’ drama convinces that this unity has survived. One simply should not search for it in ideological slogans: this cohesion is observed in more ordinary everyday yet no less important rhetorical structures – in the relationship micromechanics, in the logics of interdependencies, in the intimate rituals. This unity manifests the resonance of negative identities [1. P. 303].

Violence, generating violence, turns into the norm, and a person is defenseless in the face of this outbreak of overall insanity: “Everyone has been infected – it’s not just who, what, how many die of it all – of explosions, murders, these terrorist attacks. Here is something else, something even more terrible, – here comes a domino effect. <...> And no one wants to stop! No one!” [9. P. 292–293].

Kevin Elyot’s play *Mouth to Mouth* (2001) also features the theme of terrorism. It goes about the internal, moral terror. Frank, the main character of the play, is terminally ill, and, though the nature of his disease is

unclear, most likely it is HIV. But Frank is madly in love with the fifteen-year-old son of his girlfriend. This passion haunts him; he suffers, but is not ready to give up his claims on Phillip. In fact, everything Frank does is nothing more than moral terror. No matter how much he tries to alter and reconsider what happened between them, his actions cannot be understood and cannot remedy the situation. Frank's passion looks pathetic and ugly because it is evil, but he constantly tries to justify himself: "FRANK. What happened – was just awful – unimaginably tragic. It's haunted me for a year. And the point is – I think it'd make quite a good play. You see, I'm coming round to the opinion that I have to use whatever's thrown at me" [10. P. 462].

Thus, uncontrolled passion often leads to violence and death. This is one of the themes widely discussed and portrayed by the representatives of the Russian "new drama". For example, this topic is at the heart of the play *The Idea of Love* (2007) by the Russian playwright Sergei Medvedev. The play was created in the rigid, shocking "new drama" aesthetics, but at the same time the terrible collision that led to the fatality is outwardly blurred. Equally smooth seems to be the natural transition of the characters from the world of the living to the shadow space. Medvedev's drama is positioned as a text about love. It blends the motifs of love and death, while the feeling of the characters, which comes in a ritual context (the first meeting takes place during the funeral dinner), is steadily approaching a tragic ending. The love conflict is resolved by a violent death of Maria, the wife of the main character. The play ends as a tragedy, although the idea of death appears at the very beginning: "A huge rat runs along the aisle in the auditorium" [11]. Alla, the beloved of the main character, seems to be identified with this rat, whose death seems to be a prelude to the tragic destiny of the heroine. Compositionally, Medvedev's drama begins with the murder of a rat, which prepares the reader/spectator for the further events and destroys the initial neutral effect.

The main character (Alexander) works as a cook in a cafe located in the same house where Alla lives. The first meeting of the characters takes place long before their fatal affair starts. They communicate through a window glass, and Alla tries to explain something to him using a sign language. Thus, this language seems to constantly remind the characters that they do not hear each other. All the dialogues are nothing more than a conversation through the barrier that separates them, since Alla is on the

other side of being, and sign language thus becomes the means of communication between the living and the dead.

In the cafe where Alexander works, funeral meals are served even more often than holiday dinners. "A MAN. <...> I'm in such a mood now that it's better to have a wake than a wedding. I'd better be with sad people now. They look more natural ..." [11]. A wake becomes a familiar form of existence for the main character, especially after parting with Alla. It turns into Alexander's daily routine, and therefore marrying Maria appears to be life substitution, perhaps a different form of death. The character meets his future wife at a corporate party, which reminded him of a mournful ritual meal: "A MAN <...> Not a wake. Although, if to think about it, parties are just the same wake: terminal boredom and a lot of vodka" [11]. Alla's deadly love does not allow Alexander to feel the thirst for life, to enjoy a successful marriage with an unloved but creative wife, Maria. Her desire to return Alexander takes the form of a phobia. The great love story ends, and the high tragedy turns into an absolute farce: "A MAN. I haven't suspected it. It didn't even occur to me ... As smart people say, history repeats itself twice: once as a tragedy, the second time as a farce. In our case, the first was a farce and the second came as a tragedy" [11].

The signs of death have been haunting Alexander since his meeting with Alla, and therefore the end of their story is natural. Death comes as payback for mutual misunderstanding: Alla and Maria die, Alexander finds a kind of harmony staying in prison. Here we observe a clear allusion to Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, though the shock experienced by Medvedev's character does not allow him to forgive himself. Yet, Alexander certainly forgives Alla. Guilt makes Alexander destroy his own life: "A MAN. <...> in fact, I had half an hour to think about it, and I realized that I had to sacrifice myself for love. For some abstract love for a female. Not for a woman, but for something feminine that involves Alla and Maria, and even Elena, Tatiana, Irina, Julia, two Annas, and a rat ..." [11].

The symbolism of death clearly objectifies in Medvedev's play at the level of the material world: the funeral ribbon decorating the photo of Nikolai Petrovich; a tattoo of a skull on the forearm of Leonid, Alla's deaf brother; a stick with a nail, which a girl used to hit little Alexander on the head, nailing his cap to it; the tie, which suddenly slipped like a noose

around Alexander's neck; the forefront of the fireplace grate, thrust into the body of Maria. Thus, the death markers make up a symbolic row and create a special system of ritual items. In the final, Alexander reveals the recipe for cooking a big carp from Kunminhu Lake, which becomes the final link in the chain of fatal events. The bounty hunter, a reluctant killer, Alexander himself becomes a victim of a woman's mad passion. He is conventionally "butchered and cooked" as an ordinary fowl or fish. Alexander is likened to his culinary masterpieces: Alla terrorized the main character with her love, and cooks her "dish" slowly, quite professionally, getting a kind of pleasure from the process. The markers of death are equally frequently objectified in the plays by the British playwrights Ravenhill (*Product*, 2005) and Elyot (*Mouth to Mouth*, 2001): Mohammed's knife, Mohammed's burning body (*Product*); Frank's dropdown eye, Phillip's near-death tango (*Mouth to Mouth*). The meeting of the characters in the play by Medvedev takes place as if in an unreal symbolic space, outside of the world of the dead, but also not among the living. In fact, any place other than the cafe is rather abstract. Nevertheless, the glass window, which separates Alla and Alexander, can be a symbol of life. Glass is a kind of charm that protects the living things, yet, being fragile, it also appears to be a symbol of human life being so vulnerable. The funeral of some Nikolai Petrovich becomes the projection of the future fate of Alexander himself: "A MAN. I looked at the photo of Nikolai Petrovich and almost cried. The black ribbon on the photo was higher than usual, so the photo seemed crossed out. You know, as on the traffic signs – 'End of city limits'. Forget it. Let's forget Nikolai Petrovich" [11]. On finding himself on the other side of life, "over the line", Alexander is free from conventions, reaches the "unbearable joy of life", and thus, perhaps, becomes immortal. In the play *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill (1982), there occurs a similar situation: legendary women who lived in different countries in different eras meet in a restaurant. Bringing together non-existent characters, Churchill deliberately creates the situation of "historical anachronism" [12].

In Medvedev's play, love and death concepts form a common context. Love makes heroes suffer, leads them to the state of collapse, and finally even kills them. Both notions are similarly great: in fact, Love is Death. The desire of the main character, Alla, to possess another man's soul does not allow her to accept the loss of the loved one, and Alla makes him

come back. When Alexander introduces himself to her deaf brother as a cook from the first floor, rather than as her fiancé or lover, he actually dies. The motifs of deafness and dumbness are equally revealed in the play: the characters continue to communicate using a sign language, without hearing each other. They do not spare the feelings of each other, do not try to understand. They suffer greatly and cannot find peace even after leaving this world. However, Alla's visit to Alexander, her attempt to reconcile with him, hoping that he will forgive her, makes the characters revive their fatal passion. Love destroys Alla and Alexander, but at the same time makes them immortal. It becomes symbolized through the rat image. In the finale, the rat turns out to be alive, and the dead woman comes on a date with her lover. Death reconciles lovers, but it does not bring them together and does not allow them to understand each other: the sign language is still the means of communication for them. In Ravenhill's monologue play *Product*, passion is perceived as a mortal danger. It is an uncontrollable passion that plunges the main character, Amy, into the abyss of hopeless madness, and urges her to commit a crime.

At the turn of the 21st century, Artaud's ideas, transformed through the prism of modernity, are embodied in the "new drama". This, in its turn, indicates the revival of his theory and the unprecedented attractiveness of the Theatre of Cruelty in contemporary society. In the history of Western European theater of the twentieth century, the works of Artaud (a poet, an essayist, an actor, and a director) are divided into two periods: "the one between World War I and II, when his theater theory was actually created, and the second at the turn of the 1970s, when this theory came from oblivion and there were numerous attempts to put it into practice" [13. P. 78].

Artaud saw the possibility of making a person free by exposing cruelty in the existing picture of the world. His task was to appeal to the inherent brutality of viewers, to free them from the ordinary because, according to Artaud, everything around us became so devalued that even death seemed something trivial: "The only thing that really affects a person is cruelty. The theater must be renewed based on this idea, being implemented to the extreme, to its logical limit" [14. P. 92]. Artaud introduced the themes of deep anguish, turmoil, and struggle to theatrical art. According to his theory, brutality is a shock, necessary to arouse subconscious:

We intended to create such a theatrical reality that could really be believed, the one that would have a truthful and painful impact on our hearts like any true feeling does <...> Hence we observe this call to cruelty and horror, which are interpreted in broader terms. The inclusiveness of such cruelty determines our own vitality, which urges us to face whatever happens [14. P. 93].

Meanwhile, the main means of integrating into the public subconscious were the ones creating the physical pressure on the viewer: specific stage effects, light flashes, sound impacts, shouting, human voice modulations, and shock value. In such a theater, as a rule, there is no stage area, so that the viewer is immediately involved in the action, and takes part in the performance:

We decided to create a show revolving around the audience to ensure an overwhelming susceptibility on the behalf of the viewers. Then the performance will never subdivide the stage and auditorium into two worlds, which are closed, separated from each other, and deprived of any opportunity to communicate, but instead will spread its visual and sound effects on the whole mass of spectators [14. P. 93].

For Artaud, the idea of cruelty was connected with the concept of catharsis, while violence was introduced to the stage to “blow up the aesthetics of entertainment and escapism”, which later became typical for the “new drama” [8. P. 250].

Reflecting on the Theatre of Cruelty, Jacques Derrida notes on its dreamlike nature: “The Theatre of Cruelty is, of course, the theater of dreams, but of violent dreams, certain and absolutely necessary, calculated and controlled dreams, in contrast to what Antonin Artaud called an empirical disorder of spontaneous dreaming” [15. P. 298]. Derrida also states that “to think of the final of the performance is to think of the cruel power of death and game” [15. P. 310].

The departure of all three actors from the stage of life in Medvedev’s play is perceived as a game, but gradually the game begins to be viewed as another, mortal, reality, which the characters and the reader/viewer recognize as real. In the plays of Ravenhill and Elyot, the mortal reality is also presented as the only possible one. After meeting Mohammed, Amy (*Product* by Mark Ravenhill) voluntarily refuses to live, as her new lover becomes the messenger of death. Amy herself becomes a symbol of death in her endless dream. In *Mouth to Mouth* by Elyot, the terminally ill

Frank, saving the life of a teenager, Phillip, actually brings his tragic ending closer.

Alexander, the main character in Medvedev's *The Idea of Love* sacrifices life and freedom for the sake of love, and this act makes him feel a better person:

A MAN. <...> It might be some erroneous/defective theory ... But I was ashamed to say that it was not me who killed, but this woman I loved someday. Not devotedly. But I did. I tried my best. I may not be capable of strong feelings. I felt shame to explain all this to the police. But when I told the police, and then the judges, that, yes, I killed her, I felt that I am stronger [11].

Thus, in the play, death becomes the only possible reality.

The motif of fire is clearly objectified in Medvedev's play *The Hairdresser* (2007). Fire brings death, but at the same time it is the attempted fire that makes Irina, the character of the play, meet her future savior. However, her inexplicable attraction to the mad arsonist Eugene and absolute indifference to the noble firefighter Victor reveal Irina's pursuit of risk taking. She does not think about death at all; on the contrary, she dreams of having children, while the desire to approach nonexistence turns into an obsession. An idyllic, at first glance, relationship with Victor only fuels the painful passion for Eugene: "IRINA (addressing the audience). In court, I asked not to punish Eugene very severely. After all, he is the father of my child. I named the boy Eugene, after his father. Six months later, Victor adopted him ... I try to cope with it" [16. P. 53]. Irina's correspondence with Eugene and her willingness to wait for him from prison becomes a sort of a performance that excites her imagination. Eugene's resemblance to action heroes makes Irina's passion go stronger: "IRINA (addressing the audience). Eugene arrived three days earlier than he had promised. He got to our barbershop on a sidecar motorcycle. He was wearing a black helmet and black shiny leather jacket. He was like a hero in an action or a horror movie" [16. P. 57].

The main character considers her everyday work in a provincial barber shop rather boring, emotionless, and so she dreams of another risky and amazingly adventurous life. Eugene, "a Dark Angel", becomes Irina's guide to the other world, to a new exciting reality: "IRINA. <...> I heard the noise of a motorcycle, and an angel in a black helmet came out to

meet me – it seemed to me that there was such a halo. It was Eugene. My dear, kind, blue-eyed Eugene” [16. P. 59]. Thus, the thirst for the “life on the line” makes the character of Medvedev’s play constantly immerse into the world of deadly illusions. An ordinary hairdresser, Irina, feels alive only being at the death’s door. A brutal performance becomes her lifesaver and makes her feel fully alive. Irina’s love for Eugene is the victim’s love for the executioner: the heroine is a perfect victim and a perfect girlfriend of a madman.

The postmodern text by Medvedev, parodying the plot of the famous film *The Night Porter* (1974) by Liliana Cavani, demonstrates the essence and psychology of the victim. The title of the play, *The Hairdresser*, clearly echoes the titles of the cult psychological novels *The Collector* (1963) by John Fowles and *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (1985) by Patrick Süskind. A pathological desire to kill and a manic passion for the killer bring Eugene and Irina together: “<...> Eugene and I are soul mates” [16. P. 51].

In the Russian and British “new drama”, the ritual of the death spell works via the contact with the audience and verbal demonstration of violence techniques. Alexander, the main character of the play *The Idea of Love* by Medvedev tells how to cut a live carp from Kunminhu Lake, describes the details of Maria’s murder and the alleged punishment of Alla, who, in turn, in every possible detail reports on her own drowning:

A FEMALE. <...> My brother and I came home. <...> filled the bath with water, undressed and started taking a bath, squeezed a little shampoo and smeared it on my hair. At that moment, my brother came into the bathroom. Silently. As usual. He quickly came up to me, put his right hand – with the skull – on my head and literally pressurized me into the water. I screamed and tasted the shampoo. He didn’t let me go. He also hit me in the face with his left hand. Anyway, he drowned me. Like Mumu” [11].

The Hairdresser provides the details of Irina’s failed murder: “He takes a hammer, wrapped in a rag, from the sidecar of the motorcycle, unfolds it, approaches Irina, hits her on the head, then covers her with straw, and sets fire to it” [16. P. 58]. Although the character survives, she still continues to wait for her executioner. In Ravenhill’s *Product*, the scenes of violence are shockingly authentic. The character equally accepts that she is doomed: “He suddenly opens his eyes; his hand rises and hits you

in the jaw. <...> His flexible body jumps out of bed, and he hits you in the stomach, you cannot catch your breath, and feel blood clots in your mouth. <...> You fear for your own life" [7. P. 670].

Reciting the most horrible details, the characters in the plays by Medvedev and Ravenhill seem to conjure death, try to combat it. The "victim-executioner" theme becomes the core focus area in the plays of British playwrights. In Ravenhill's *Product*, Mohammed tortures his beloved Amy, dressed in clothes designed by Gucci and Versace, and it is the "victim complex" that subsequently makes the character expect physical violence from her other lovers as well: "And you beg Nathan to hit you on the head. You give him a stick and say, come on, come on, hit me. But he loves you so dearly, and he runs away into the night, in this way Nathan leaves you" [7. P. 675].

In the play *Top Girls* (1982) by Churchill, Patient Griselda forgives Marquis, her husband, who exposes his wife to psychological violence to make sure she loved him:

GRISELDA. He sent me away. He said the people wanted him to marry someone else who'd give him an heir and he'd got special permission from the Pope. So I said I'd go home to my father. I came with nothing / so I went with nothing. I <...> took off my clothes. He let me keep a slip so he wouldn't be shamed. And I walked home barefoot. My father came out in tears. Everyone was crying except me" [12. P. 89–90].

In general, Churchill's drama has a distinct feminist focus, though the "new drama" of the turn of the 21st century is definitely male-dominated. Meanwhile we consider earlier works, aimed at highlighting gender characteristics. The "aggressive theater" of the late 1980s and early 1990s was associated with feminism as a form of struggle against social segregation:

Feminist views really played a significant role in the creative destiny of the writer; however, the opposite is also true: Churchill masterfully and yet outrageously, in an original way, emphasizes the main problems of feminism, attracting public attention to them and deservedly being considered the greatest feminist playwright in the UK. The most famous examples of Caryl Churchill "feminist" works are "Cloud nine" (1979), "Vinegar Tom" (1976), and "Top Girls" (1982) [6. P. 99].

In fact, *Top Girls* is a play about victims and executioners, about "angry" women, whose lives have long depended on men, but the desire to

live allowed these characters to overcome the monstrous dependence and the victim complex. The victim complex is a theme that frequently lies at the basis of modern British and Russian drama. The period of the “paradigm shift” gives birth to new characters, who cannot resist challenges and do not value life. The victim, as a rule, has no choice, and the hairdresser Irina (*The Hairdresser* by Medvedev) does not choose her fate. The future is imposed on her: the fireman Victor and the arsonist Eugene make decisions for her. The businesswoman Amy (*Product* by Ravenhill) meekly obeys a casual stranger, which condemns her to long suffering and even death. Trusting her friend and relying on him, Laura (*Mouth to Mouth* by Elyot) does not want to notice the problems of her own child and subsequently risks losing him.

In the plays of all the authors mentioned above, (Sergei Medvedev, Mark Ravenhill, Kevin Elyot, and Caryl Churchill) the border line that separates the world of the living from the world of the dead is erased, and the spaces merge into one. Thus, death ceases to be a mystery and turns into a tragic performance. Characters seem to live in two dimensions at once and, thus, suffer from a split personality. Such “borderline” characters cannot adjust to the reality, yet they do not feel comfortable staying outside the boundary of realism. They are flexible and switch from life to death, from the image of a victim to that of an executioner, easily move between the stage and the audience, fiction and truth. The characters of the “new drama” are in tune with the modern period of hero degeneration; moreover, they become its symbol, since they exist in the frontier space and at the same time live in the “time of troubles”. Radical drama and “aggressive theater” appear at the turn of the 21st century, when humanity realized itself being on the verge of a global catastrophe. Based on the aesthetics of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, the “new drama” becomes dominant in artistic rendering of the “paradigm shift” period. In a contemporary theater, the audience can participate in the performance (THEATER.DOC) or distance from it, yet the key concept of the “new drama” is the notion of “calamitous existence”. The plays by contemporary British authors Mark Ravenhill, Kevin Elyot, Caryl Churchill, Leo Butler, Philip Ridley, Joe Penhall, Martin McDonagh, as well as the Russian playwrights Oleg Bogaev, Vasily Sigarev, Ivan Vyrypaev, Presnyakov brothers, Durnenkov brothers, Vadim Levanov, Mikhail Ugarov, Yuri Klavdiev, Sergei Medvedev, force the reader/viewer to go through a

conditional disaster. At the end of a play, the viewer experiences a shock, has a sense of emptiness, futility, and hopelessness. The text, as a rule, centers on the feeling of anxiety and latent threat. Appealing to an emerging disaster, almost every play creates the effect of an everlasting nightmare.

Lipovetsky notes that such playwrights as “Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane view scenes of violence <...> as a powerful trigger of the unconscious: they destroy the rational, make the continuous nightmare of the young characters in a prosperous society tangible. Scenes of violence in their plays cause shock to the viewer, and thus disturb their peace of mind” [1. P. 17]. However, in the Russian “new drama” of the turn of the 21st century, we mostly observe the cases of domestic violence that becomes part of everyday life, everyday communication. Thus,

Communicative violence is brought to the fore as a ‘natural’, commonly understood language of power and subordination <...>. At the same time, in the ‘new drama’, violence and its languages have acquired an unexpected meaning that goes beyond social diagnostics and criticism. Violence on the stage engages the viewer, turns into a special, shocking, yet recognizable ritual” [1. P. 365, 367].

In the play *Gin and Tonic* (also known as *Kiss me, Federico*, 2006) by Medvedev, the characters also play with death: the action takes the form of a comic context, death seems to be blurred, but gradually the game setting comes to the foreground and the farce dominates. The character, who cynically deceives his loved ones, finds himself between life and death. Becoming the victim of a terrorist attack, Vladimir, dreaming to simulate his own death, neither sympathizes nor helps the others. He just wants to pretend being dead and to look at his own previous life from aside, to see how the relatives and friends would react to his death, if they mourn him or not: “VLADIMIR. <...> Near the factory entrance they post an obituary ... And I dash home, home, home... I always wanted to know the truth, what they would write about me after death. I wanted to see who would cry after me...” [17]. A strange dream – meeting with Juliet Mazina (or just Julia), dancing in a dark cinema, reincarnation, a new life after he becomes Federico, a Russian guy, – become a reality. The phantasmagoric ending of the play turns everything into an absolute farce: “The lights in the hall come up. A policeman stands near the switch. Being rather drunk, Vladimir looks around. He sees Julia for the first time in bright light, and

notices that she is very old. Horror and surprise are read on his face” [17]. At first glance, *Gin and Tonic*, as well as other texts by Medvedev, entails comic interludes as the basic plot dominants. Death, being mocked, seems to recede, loses its negative connotations, and turns into a game, which is characteristic for rituals or spells. Nevertheless, the characters preserve an acute tragic perception of reality, keep being emotionally fragile. They seem to be constantly sacrificing each other, which contributes to the emergence of the feeling of being “mixed up in disgust; sacred, appearing here and now, being born out of an ugly and painful ritual. This ritual integrates all the characters and the audience; though it does not promise or bring catharsis, it is able to unite everyone with their common pain” [1. P. 367].

In the majority of the plays by Medvedev the characters easily shift from the mortal reality to the “living life”. In Medvedev’s works, the border between the worlds of the living and the dead is erased, and the characters exist in a common, unified space. In fact, the non-absurdist plays actively operate the artistic techniques of the “theater of the absurd”, which forms “a special, awkward world of people, alienated from each other. Instead of the characters, there are either caricature types and masks, or conventional figures who conduct equally conventional conversations in a conventional world” [18. P. 126]. Thus, the texts of modern Russian and English playwrights demonstrate a consistent reduction to absurdity of situations and circumstances that do not make the norm, and even contradict it. The flip side of love is hatred, idyllic beauty is devalued by tragedy, and external harmony hides a deep internal imbalance. Contemporary drama embodies the endless nightmare of the depicted reality and “dishcloths” a deep essential disharmony in a seemingly prosperous world. At the same time, British drama is spectacular, aggressive and visually more distinct precisely because

<V>violence in this theatre always remains an excess: it invades the process of ‘normal’ communication, reveals the fake nature of the ‘norm’, undermining the discourse and giving the way to the unconscious – for a brief moment, at least for the duration of the performance. In other words, nowhere in In-Yer-Face Theatre violence is viewed as a norm, as a form of communication, familiar to the characters and treated by the audience with surprise” [1. P. 217].

It is no surprise that after the premiere of the play *Blasted* in 1995 at the English Royal Court Theatre, the “angry woman”, Sarah Kane, was at

the center of one of the largest scandals (the critics called the play of the young playwright “disgusting”) since the production of Edward Bond’s play *Saved* (1965). Bond is known as a straight-out author who refused to remove dirty words from the text and to cut out the scene of the baby being stoned, which was the reason for banning the play by the censors. Since then, Bond himself has forbidden to stage it in England, granting only Sheen Holmes to do it in 2011. In 1965, the critics and many viewers perceived the play as a vilification of the modern British society. The Royal Court Theatre had to arrange a special day to uphold the play, explaining the meaning of a number of scenes to the audience. In the drama *Saved*, the playwright talks about violence, cruelty, and pitiful life in working-class neighborhoods of South London. Intransigence of the playwright alienated some of the audience, forced many to empathize, caused some to resist, but no one was indifferent. The play *Saved* has opened a new chapter of British drama, like it was with John Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger* (1956). The “angry young people” are rebelling against the rigid social stratification that has developed in society and the conservative policy that has left them no choice. The characters of the plays by Osborne and Bond try to find their place in modern society, but find themselves unwanted and misunderstood. Their anger falls on the audience, prompting the viewer, who is not used to cruel details, scandalous and violent scenes, to see and feel all the misery and imperfection of our life. In his essay on violence, Bond examines the causes of violence: “It [violence] occurs in situations of injustice. Its cause may be not only a physical threat, but more significantly a threat to human dignity” [19. P. 13].

However, in the 1990s, the British society is still not sufficiently loyal. Social inequality, unemployment, domestic violence, drug addiction, the dominance of pop culture and consumer mentality – all this contributes to the emergence of a new character type. He is no longer a boy from the working-class suburbs, but rather a respectable representative of the petty bourgeoisie or just an outcast. The characters live by the rules of the market: in the world, dominated by demand and supply schemas, individual life is devalued. Everything becomes a commodity: love, sex, truth, a human, and a human’s life. Representatives of the In-Yer-Face Theatre actively rebel against the consumer society, but to evoke the reaction of the jaded and cynical audience of the nineties, immersed in the permanent process of consumption, they needed much more radical practices than

those before. Only applying shocking artistic techniques one can awaken the modern audience from its slumber. Demonstrating scenes of violence, playwrights force the viewer to leave the comfort zone and plunge into the world of strong emotions. Thus, all representatives of the British In-Yer-Face Theatre use shock therapy in their texts: “They are extremely critical of the most bitter phenomena of their time: apathy, cynicism, commercialism, political violence at home and abroad, the loss of viable ideologies and the nihilism and self-destruction that replaced them” [20. P. 25]. As for the Russian “new drama” with its everyday nightmares and “communicative violence” (the term introduced by Mark Lipovetsky), we rather mean an artistic phenomenon that is characteristic of the global social and cultural situation at the turn of the millennium – the period of destructing one society and creating another. The Russian audience has never been jaded, cynical, and bored. Thus, pretty offensive and unjustifiably cruel drama images perform the primary function of depicting the surrounding reality, which has become too familiar, and therefore often not properly realized. Consequently, the Russian playwrights of the turn of the 21st century aim to make a person with a locked consciousness, the one, who tries not to notice the horrors of reality, “look back in anger”.

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