

## INTERVIEW

Mikhail DURNENKOV

### WE HAVEN'T LOST OUR LANGUAGE, THE ONLY THING THAT UNITES US



Photos © Mikhail Durnenkov and Natalia Skorokhod

Today, Lubimovka modestly presents itself as follows: "The Lubimovka Independent Playwriting Festival is a nonprofit international project of Russian speaking playwrights". This description makes it sound like just one of the hundreds of events organised by the Russian-speaking community of the fourth wave of emigration from the Russian state (whether an empire, republic, union, federation, or otherwise). With a history spanning over thirty years, the Lubimovka phenomenon – the annual competition of Russian-language plays – has served as a platform for new aesthetic, ethical, pedagogical, curatorial and culture-management ideas, even inspiring new theoretical approaches. It has been compelling theatre and drama researchers to repeatedly revisit the events of the recent past. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the festival's September events in Moscow became the official start of the new theatre season and the main cultural event in

Russia. In 2022, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the festival was forced to leave Russia and became an event in exile. I am not aware of any other similar cases in the history of the arts where an entire festival has relocated its homeland. Nevertheless, the festival continues to exist and operate as an annual competition for Russophone plays. In 2022, 2023 and 2024, many festival events took place in various locations outside of Russia, where new plays were presented in the format of a director's reading, similar to how it was done in Moscow.

One of the key figures who has been closely associated with the Lubimovka Festival since 2010 is Mikhail Durnenkov (born 1978), a writer, playwright, screenwriter, curator, and teacher. After the playwright expressed his opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a criminal case was opened against him under the charge of discrediting the armed forces of the Russian Federation. Now, he and his family reside in Finland. In exile, Mikhail continues his career and his new plays are being staged in Estonia, Germany, Finland, and other countries.

Dr. Natalia Skorokhod is a theatre critic, researcher, and a former professor of drama and theatre at the Russian State Institute of Stage Arts in St. Petersburg, Russia. She now has the status of a scholar at risk and resides in Berlin. She interviewed Mikhail Durnenkov about the main historical events of Lubimovka, including the festival's emigration in 2022. The interview took place on 28 August 2023, in Finland.

In this three-hour conversation, the historical significance of Lubimovka was discussed within a special context. Most questions focused on Lubimovka as a unique creative community of playwrights that generated a huge creative and socio-cultural potential over two decades in the twenty-first century. It also served as a unique example of the Russian cultural movement. Aesthetic ideas, such as the nature of drama that emerged with the help of Lubimovka, were briefly addressed, mainly in relation to how the festival and movement's aesthetic identity evolved over the years.

The aim of the interview was to describe the democratic, vital, and dynamic mechanism that was created during Lubimovka's Moscow period. It also explored how this mechanism was able to self-renew and evolve through horizontal structures, as well as aesthetic and organisational opportunities for new participants.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Well, Lubimovka. I want to start our dialogue about Lubimovka with the magazine called *Teatr* (*Theatre*), issue No. 48, 2021, which unintentionally drew a line, such an existential line under the festival, and turned out to be a reflection of the outcomes of the movement. No one counted on it, it was just a thematic issue dedicated to the most famous Russian dramaturgy festival.

But historically it turned out so beautiful, if that is the right word to use in this case, how *Lubimovka* changed its format almost immediately after the publication of the magazine. The Festival of Young Drama ceased to exist in Russia after February 23, 2022 when Russian invasion of Ukraine started. By the way, this magazine was soon shut down. And now we can already look at these thirty years of the existence of *Lubimovka* phenomenon from a historical distance. Not a long historical distance, but we can still draw some important conclusions right now. And my first question is how you would characterize *Lubimovka*, weighing it, if I may put it this way, from an aesthetic and social perspective. What was its importance in the theatrical process and in the development of young drama in the post-Soviet cycle?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Well, probably, this process should be considered in dynamic terms because it was changing. And, if we talk about the first decade of the festival's life, since the process was launched in 1991, then, of course, *Lubimovka* was a seminar led by senior and experienced authors for young playwrights. And it was such a phenomenon of "paper dramaturgy", comparable to "paper architecture".

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Well, I understand, yes. Drama in the absence of theatre since there was no interest for contemporary plays in Russian theatre at all in the 1990s.<sup>1</sup>

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**Mikhail Durnenkov:** People continued writing plays anyway, playwrighting is one of the oldest professions, you know... And in order for these plays to be seen by anyone, this seminar arose in the former Stanislavsky estate. For the purpose, as it seems to me, of preventing frustration among the young, so that they would show up and write somehow. But in itself, it was very vital, it turned out to be a model. It turned out that these senior playwrights had the responsibility not just for the movement, for the *Lubimovka* seminar, but also for ensuring in general that the new drama had a place in the theatre.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** It led to the creation of this movement, as they come up with the idea. Because a movement of playwrights had never existed before until that case in Russia. As it turned out, the name of the festival was, generally speaking, accidental, since these seminars were held at the estate of the great Russian director, which at that time belonged to the Theatre Union.

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<sup>1</sup> During that time (1990–2000), theaters were just freed from both censorship and the requirement to stage a "modern Soviet play" each season, which was an indispensable condition for the repertoire in Soviet years. The stage was soon filled with previously banned plays, dramatizations of prose and classical works.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Yes, accidentally or not. I tried to somehow analyse the difference between this kind of movement of playwrights, this collective support among playwrights, what sets them apart from other creative workshops. Why isn't there, for example, similar support among poets or prose writers? Why do poets and prose writers, within these forms of verbal art, seem to bicker like wild animals? After all, it seems that there is competition among prose writers, poets, and playwrights, isn't there?

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Well, of course.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Yes, but apparently, I figured it out... Well, the fact is that drama is not a necessary element for theatre at all.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Agreed. And for the Russian theatre of the 1990s – for sure.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** And in general, as a global rule. That is why it is important for a playwright that a mouse does not simply snatch a piece of pie and drag it into a hole to feed itself, but also works to expand “the feeding area”, in other words, the creative spaces in which he or she lives. Well, you know... To build up a creative territory. To make it complete and equipped. Therefore, there is an existential reason why Lubimovka has become a movement of playwrights. You need to invest not only in yourself, but also in helping those around you understand that modern drama is a necessity. And this is not some kind of an axiom, or a given to everyone in the theatre. This is what we had to fight for. And it seems to me that this was probably the main reason senior playwrights invested their energy in the young, helping them survive this age that they themselves had once experienced. They are survivors too, right? Well, you can say that these senior colleagues, they are...

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Name them, please.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Survivors. The first generation included Roshchin,<sup>2</sup> Kazantsev,<sup>3</sup> and later came Ugarov,<sup>4</sup> Gremina,<sup>5</sup> Isaeva<sup>6</sup>...

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Roshin (1933–2010) is a respectable Soviet playwright and scriptwriter. He published (together with Alexey Kazantsev) the journal *Dramaturg* (*The Playwright*) from 1993–1998. In 1998, they founded the Center for Dramaturgy and Directing in Moscow.

<sup>3</sup> Kazantsev Alexey (1945–2007) is a Russian and Soviet playwright and director (Moscow).

<sup>4</sup> Mikhail Ugarov (1956–2018) is a Russian playwright, actor, director and teacher in playwrighting as well as the founder and artistic leader of Theatre.doc in Moscow.

<sup>5</sup> Elena Gremina (1956–2018) is a Russian playwright, scriptwriter, actress, director and producer in Moscow.

<sup>6</sup> Elena Isaeva (1966) is a Russian playwright and poet (Moscow).

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Dragoonskaya?<sup>7</sup>

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Dragoonskaya, yes, of course. Levanov,<sup>8</sup> Kolyada.<sup>9</sup> Those are the people who survived as dramaturgs when theatre had no use for dramaturgy. Like a boy who survived against all odds. And, of course, they wanted the living space for playwrights to become wider, to make it easier for the young to survive.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** To conclude, for the first ten years, from 1992 to 2002, Lubimovka was a rather closed club, a seminar for playwrights under the wing of the Union of Theatrical Figures of the USSR. Once a year, although with occasional gaps, young playwrights gathered at Stanislavsky's estate on the Klyazma River. New plays were read, theatre projects emerged, but there was not yet that drive, that wide resonance of Lubimovka that would later be established as a significant phenomenon of the theatrical process in Russia, right?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Yes, that's probably how the first ten years passed. But why did it become important? I was talking about the functions that were inherent in Lubimovka from the beginning, and, crucially, it retained them until the end, even as the format completely changed. And in the early 2000s, new directions joined the old ones. Lubimovka became not just a field of study, but also a field of dramatic experiment, a place for refining new forms of dramatic art and a gathering point for young playwrights. Yes, this is exactly what Lubimovka had become already in the new twenty-first century, having moved to Moscow at the beginning of 2000s. Because initially it was a festival of young playwrights, and then it suddenly became important. Perhaps the most important thing was that Lubimovka gathered the youngsters. And young people in general are always, in some sense, revolutionaries. Young playwrights, back in the early 2000s, typically came from the street rather than from educational institutions. And for them, Lubimovka became a field of experiment and experience.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** In playwrighting? Or in the theatre?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** In both dramatic and theatrical sense. It is important to note that in other cases, new drama and contemporary theatre could no longer be separated from each other. It is here that the figure of Mikhail Ugarov, who used

<sup>7</sup> Xenia Dragunskaya (1966–2021) is a Russian writer, playwright, art-researcher and scriptwriter (Moscow).

<sup>8</sup> Vadim Levanov (1967–2011) is a Russian playwright, director and teacher in playwrighting. In 2001 he founded the Theatre Center "Golosova, 20" in Tolyatti.

<sup>9</sup> Nikolay Kolyada (b. 1957) is a Russian playwright, actor, director and teacher in playwrighting, founder and artistic leader of Kolyada Theatre (Kolyada-Teatr) in Ekaterinburg.

to be a participant, a loyal member of this closed club, this seminar on Klyazma, acquires great importance. But in the early 2000s, he became the leader of Lubimovka. At that time, he himself was an innovator of dramaturgy, in what he wrote, pushing boundaries with dramaturgy in his time.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Yes, his famous *Oblom off* based on the well-known 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian novel by A. Goncharov *Oblomov*,<sup>10</sup> blew up the domestic scene. Oblomoff's monologue about what “Dick” mean was such a provocation... But then, the following dramatizations somehow did not have the same resonance, and he immersed himself in Lubimovka, he dedicated himself completely to the festival, both creatively and practically, in every sense.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** In every sense, that should be stressed, yes. And if you look at this activity from a bird's-eye view, he approached something new in terms of theory of drama. The main issues he dealt with were the absence of an obligatory scene, an obligatory event in a play, as well as the absence of an obligatory event in a character's life. He opposed the way classical drama formulates a human character with just one phrase.

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**Natalia Skorokhod:** The “grain of the character”?<sup>11</sup>

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Yes, the proverbial grain. And Ugarov felt that life is always broader and a person is always broader than he is portrayed in a conventional drama. And he always fought for a life beyond the dramatic formula.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Well, here I can't help but notice that such ideas weren't actually anything new—they'd been around for the last century or may be even earlier... Ostrovsky tried to fulfil the old classical dramaturgical formula with the life of contemporary merchants and commoners. The smell of reality and documentaries were very important for him. And Chekhov...

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Yes, yes, yes, and Chekhov, especially Chekhov who said “Nothing happens in my dramas”. Yes, yes, yes, he said in general “I'm not a playwright, but life is also not a vaudeville”...

**Natalia Skorokhod:** But Ugarov probably has more radical ideas than his predecessors... And his ideas were framed by his era... For instance, he was the

<sup>10</sup> Oblomov is an old Russian surname. In contemporary Russian slang, “oblom” means crash. Thus, Ugarov engages in wordplay with the title of his play, linking it with Goncharov's novel.

<sup>11</sup> This is a terminology much used in Russian theatre school which means the which means the character's essence.

one who grafted the branch of documentary theatre and documentary play onto the tree of the Russian stage.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** It seems to me that he was just an ideologist of the idea that dramaturgy must acquire an uncertainty almost similar to life. His dramatic formula is that there is no formula at all. And he influenced the young authors and welcomed the authors which worked in this way... You know, by the mid-2000s, Ugarov was already a very influential figure in this dramatic circle. He was the one who brought authors like Pavel Pryazhko<sup>12</sup> to the fore and introduced them to the city and the world. He was fascinated by the absence of the main dramatic elements in Pryazhko's plays.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Yes, of course, I perfectly remember the first staging of the play *Underpants (Trusy)* by then unknown Pryazhko from Belarus, when by then well-known Ivan Vyrypaev read Pryazhko's play on his own at the St. Petersburg Drama Theatre on Liteyny. I witnessed this scandal, the outrage of the public, which wildly rushed to defend the foundations of Hegel and Aristotle. So, Ugarov created a field of experiments at the Lubimovka platform, and Lubimovka also incorporated this new form-making project into the festival, which later led to the creation of the Fringe program. It was Ugarov and his team, including Elena Gremina, who founded Theater.Doc (Teatr.doc) in Moscow in 2002. They also founded the Novaya Drama Festival, where productions based on new plays were shown every year, from 2002 to 2009. However, this is well-known. Was there anything else not so well-known about the organisation of Lubimovka during Ugarov's time?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** After this revolution in the construction of drama and its connection to reality, young playwrights felt like revolutionaries when they shared their work on stage with their peers. Gradually, this Lubimovka circle turned into a marketplace for plays.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** So Lubimovka has become a supplier of plays... for whom and for what?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** For the first time, an economic factor appeared. Yes, and once again thanks, first of all, to Ugarov, because for several years in a row he led such seminars in Yasnaya Polyana, where playwrights would connect with directors. He paired a young playwright with a young director to work together

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<sup>12</sup> Pryazhko Pavel (b. 1975) is a very respectable Belarussian playwright who writes in Russian language and who has invented many new tools in the art of drama. He lives in Minsk.



on the idea for a play. The creative result of such a collaboration over five days was not significant. The main result was beyond what was officially proclaimed as the result. As a rule, the director coming to the seminar knew little about new dramaturgy, or who the contemporary playwrights were in general, what they looked like and what kind of beast they were. By the end, the director left completely in love with a particular playwright – his or her new co-author – and was eager to collaborate with them again.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** A training to fall in love with a playwright?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Yes. And it started somewhere around 2006–2007 already. Yes, and now the market for new dramaturgy is already more or less developed. At least it exists. That is, if the starting point was the theatre's complete lack of interest in new drama, then it was Lubimovka during Ugarov's era that created the phenomenon of the market for new plays. The third thing that Lubimovka triggered in the second decade of its existence was the need for playwrights, which became a fashionable topic in the mid-2000s.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** And what happened next?

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**Mikhail Durnenkov:** As time went by, and now I will say immodestly, from the moment we<sup>13</sup> started leading Lubimovka as art directors, and this happened in 2012, when our team began steering, that's when Lubimovka turned into something like a community. Since 2012, the festival has also become a place of public meetings not only for theatre professionals, but Lubimovka also unites the audience and ultimately creates a certain atmosphere around the festival and beyond. This was largely due to the rise of social networks. We, our team, went into social networks and started inviting new playwrights. Well, we thought that social networks reached everywhere, and that this way we would find playwrights in the most unexpected places. So, while about 200 plays were submitted annually for the competition until 2012, since then, this number has incredibly increased to 700-800, and, as far as I remember, the figure 825 is the largest, this is Lubimovka's record. Of course, the number of plays entering the competition is different each year.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** So, Lubimovka caused a playwriting boom!

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<sup>13</sup> The team of art directors (2013–2018): Mikhail Durnenkov (b. 1978); Evgeniy Kazatchkov (b. 1981) is a Russian playwright, script maker, curator and teacher now based in Israel; Anna Banasukevich (b. 1985) is a theatre critic, lecturer and curator based in Moscow.



**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Of course, we were stunned by how many people were writing plays, but we were even more amazed by how many people – actors, theatre students, sociologists, philosophers, those who are not directly related to drama or theatre – began to come and listen to the directors' readings of plays. The annual festival had suddenly become a public event. That is, there used to be a closed club, a professional competition, an internal workshop, and suddenly it became some kind of annual place of pilgrimage for audience. The spirit of intimacy disappeared, publicity took over. Open discussions appeared where public was invited to participate. And the voice of the "elders", the voice of the "teachers", their opinions about the play which were extremely authoritative, to some extent sacred in the past, suddenly dissolved in the flow of different replies by the audience that was eager to take part in discussions. Suddenly, the discussion of the play which was held immediately after the reading became as important as the reading of a play itself. The public wanted to become and became a significant part of the festival. And as for me, I was especially fascinated that sociologists started participating, because it was important for them to look at the country through the lens of Lubimovka.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Did the old-timers see this as a partial deprofessionalisation?

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**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Probably, yes. Because Lubimovka, and this is important to note, is a competition. It was created as a contest, there was always a competition of plays that were selected for presentation at the festival. From the total number of presented plays, only a short list was selected for readings and analysis at the seminar. This principle has been preserved to this day. But then during the festival, there were no prizes, that is, the festival did not become a championship, there was no first, second, third place...

**Natalia Skorokhod:** This is, in my opinion, the only significant difference between Lubimovka and playwrights' competitions in ancient Athens – at the Dionysia, first, second and third places were still awarded and they were awarded by the audience.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Yes, yes, yes... But if we had introduced such a competition with first, second and third places, it would have turned into a game of heavyweights, closed rotation of top professionals. Instead, we came up with the idea in the end to even force the professionals out of the main program, and send them to a separate "Off program". This is also an important thing implemented by our team. Why? I'll tell you now. At the festival, on the short list of Lubimovka, which is publicly

read in Moscow in September each year, there are about thirty, sometimes more new plays. And, as I've already mentioned, this is a specific slice of our reality. Yes, in fact, speaking from the point of view of professionalism, there have been worse and better plays at the festival, but each of them was interesting in its own way. The selection criteria developed by our team was posted on the Lubimovka website.

The criteria are very simple: the play makes it into the main program of the festival if, as far as I remember, there is either a new language, or a new theme, or some new dimension of an old theme, a new way of looking at reality, a new type of person, a new character. You see, in these criteria, the word “new” is always present. So, since 2012 Lubimovka has been living and moving thanks to the word “new.” It gave an survey, a seasonal update of many reflections on real life, which is why sociologists took an interest in us. An unexpected reality that is suddenly captured in a play; yes, perhaps this play lacks professional polish, but it gives us a fresh perspective on where we have not been yet; it takes us on a new and fascinating journey into society, into the problems, for instance, of fishermen from Kamchatka, you see?

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Certainly.

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**Mikhail Durnenkov:** We read and we think, oh, how interesting. And even if the structure of the play is poor, we still take it to Lubimovka. And when we saw that we needed to expand the program with such new, completely unexpected plays, since the number of submissions had increased fourfold, we realised that we needed to get rid of the top professionals. We introduced a new rule: if an author featured in the main program three times, that was it – full stop. After that, you are already a top professional and you have a place only in the “off-program”. This became a principle: we bring in new, unknown authors, and once theatres show interest in a particular play, they work with that author. Well, actually, that's it, you're already a professional, go and earn money. Please, let new people have the opportunity to participate and be noticed.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** So, it's such a unique opportunity for a seasonal update of perspectives on things, views on life in Eurasia. This was a completely new feature of Lubimovka. And you explore this function even at the expense of developing the market for new plays, right?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Yes and no. It was a gesture to present this new picture of reality every year, but there was also pragmatism in the work of our team, huge pragmatism. Evgeny Kazachkov and I, when we were art directors and were preparing for the next festival, I remember this moment very well, I suddenly have

this image in my head... And I said that we got an artesian well from our senior colleagues. You know, they just gave it to us. Lubimovka is just like a spring that rises from the ground every year. All we can do is build paths around this well, asphalt them carefully so that there is no crush among the pilgrims, what else? Oh, we can also bottle water. And each of these images correspond to something completely practical. Water bottling, for example, is a delivery of new plays to the theatre. That is, we need to work on the festival's website, we need to improve it, we need to make sure that the shortlisted plays can be downloaded throughout the year. It was necessary to simplify access to new texts for theatres.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** It's understandable, yes. That is, the festival became a well-known and even top-fashion annual platform for public encounters and discussions. And gradually there came a political aspect, right? Let's talk about the last decade, when the pressure of censorship, anonymous slander, bans, and eventually real repression grew stronger and stronger.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Well, of course, Lubimovka was and is an absolutely liberal institution. And it is liberal for one simple reason. We give everyone the opportunity to speak, we appreciate all individual voices, there is no censorship of topics or any other aspect. But imagine a homophobic law is passed in Russia. The authors immediately react and write plays on LGBT topics, or let's say, gay-friendly texts. And they send their plays to our competition and we include some of them in the Lubimovka Festival program because we think it's important, at that time. Yes, yes, yes, we understand that this is the agenda of the moment. So, initially with no political message or orientation, we had to become a political circle in the context of the gradual strangulation of freedom in Russia. Because it was the mission of the festival – to give a voice to everyone. And the more the screws were tightened, the more we involuntarily became a political platform. Well, there was also the fact that, plays by people with anti-democratic, anti-liberal beliefs were not submitted to Lubimovka, there were no homophobic texts, for example. It was somehow understood that such plays would not be sent to our competition. Therefore, there was no censorship on our part either.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Well, if a great homophobic play came out or one praising Putin as a hero? Then what?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** You know, in general, conservatives don't write good modern plays. Yes, they can write well. For instance, I remember a play in our competition that featured dukes and counts, written in beautiful Shakespearean language. It had well-structured action, intrigue, and characters. You see,

everything was there, except for one thing – the sense of the present moment. It wasn't on the agenda at all. The author's understanding of today's reality, as well as the ability to express it, is incompatible with conservative ideology. So, it turns out that relevance and liberalism somehow go hand in hand. Which means it is impossible to be a patriot or a so-called “pochvennik”<sup>14</sup> and write a truly topical play. It's somehow impossible.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** I agree. It seems to me that this is the answer to the question why really talented authors do not support the current war in our country and do not create patriotic plays. Even if they do have a desire, they are not able to. Talent is always linked to the agenda, that's what talent is about.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** And the aesthetic platform on which a patriot stands today, well, of course, it is very muddy, but nevertheless, he/she somehow stands on it, and with this aesthetic platform he/she pulls us only into the past. Yes, yes. We live in a world of modern art and this is a process, and only someone who manages to keep up with this process is able to write with talent, that's true, yes.

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**Natalia Skorokhod:** So let's talk about contemporary art. We have already said that somehow; yes, there was a theatre, there was a play market, there was a community with political features but the context was expanding, and the Lubimovka Fringe program appeared in 2014 and the festival also become a place...

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** To look for a formula of a new theatre, yes. Well, not even for a new theatre, but actually for contemporary art. Since the reading itself was gradually turning into an average theatrical format, the presentation of the play as a reading became so commonplace that almost all theatres in Russia adopted this form and started using it without a problem. And practice has shown that hearing a play read by actors or the author himself appeals to the audience. Visual images that emerge in the audience's imagination during a play reading proved to be really effective. I will quote Marina Davydova<sup>15</sup> here, who once said: “I hear a play, I really like the reading, but I will not feel like seeing a performance based on this play, because I have already received all the impressions I could get from the play from the reading”. Well, a lot of the texts successfully presented at the Lubimovka Festival over the years did not need to be staged at all. And the feelings that you get during the reading are as strong as after a good show. So, let's

<sup>14</sup> People who believe that Western values are impossible to accept for Russians.

<sup>15</sup> Marina Davydova (b. 1966) is a respectable Russian and European theatre critic, curator and director based in Berlin.

say Vanya Vyrypaev<sup>16</sup> sends his new play to the festival every year. And he reads it himself. We've always had stars on the program and a surprisingly large number of people always wanted to hear a play and see how it was read by the author. To listen to a play and to see how it is performed by the author.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** We touched upon Fringe.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Well, Fringe was born at a time when Russian-speaking contemporary dramaturgy became mainstream, when new plays by young authors entered theatres and simply became part of the repertoire. When famous directors started to stage authors of the new generation, and some theatres began to specialize in modern dramaturgy, most theatre companies would occasionally include a contemporary play in their repertoire. When the viral press appeared, for instance, after reading the play *28 Days (28 dnei)*,<sup>17</sup> it sparked discussion everywhere in the media. Even without high-profile productions – it is a paradox that there were almost no productions of this play by Olga Shilyaeva – it caused a real media boom. The play entered the media space, everybody was discussing it, downloading it, reading it and commenting on it. Yes, at that time, when Lubimovka suddenly became mainstream, we realised that we could not keep up with new forms of theatre. Russia had already absorbed the new formula of "post-dramatic" theatre<sup>18</sup> and the term "post-drama" was already looming on the horizon. And we were afraid that what we were doing was already losing relevance, but we were used to doing theatre that felt current. And we began to welcome, as they say, plays that responded to this new challenge of the post-drama theatre, which, generally speaking, did not need any plays. You know, this is the sense of post-dramatic theatre. Or, let's say, such plays that pose impossible tasks to the theatre. That is how the Fringe-program of Lubimovka came to existence.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Those tasks that Lehmann wrote about. I have to come up with a new theatre in order to stage this new play. It is not even a play, it's unknown what exactly it is.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** This was, by the way, one of the criteria of our Fringe program, one of the principles of the selection of plays for Fringe, when you read a text and do not understand what it is and what theatre needs to do with it. And

<sup>16</sup> Ivan Vyrypaev (b. 1974) is a respectable Russian and European playwright, stage and film director and producer based in Warsaw.

<sup>17</sup> *28 Days* (2018) is a play by Olga Shilyaeva which describes the feelings and sensations of the heroine during the menstrual cycle.

<sup>18</sup> This refers to the term "post-dramatic theater" by Hans-Thies Lehmann.

then we realised that Fringe needed more qualified people, new selectors. There are people who simply have a trained eye to detect those plays, among many others, written with mathematical formulas, or plays formed as card games, or something like that. Pictures, yes, comics, whatever, a musical score. We specifically selected one day during Lubimovka; it was always a day somewhere in the middle of the program. It was the day when I came to the festival as a spectator. Because this day was selected by the Fringe team. And I watched presentations of these plays just sitting in the auditorium, resting. All these adherents of the new theatre fell in love with this particular day of the Lubimovka Festival. That is, even people who, in principle, are not drawn to drama and theatre at all starting attending the Lubimovka Fringe program because it became their day.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Well, yes, it still seems to me that it was already part of contemporary art.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** It was absolutely a kind of gallery of contemporary art at Lubimovka. This was also, in general, a very good trend. Besides all this, it was a shot of fresh blood into the festival's veins, an audience that attended only Fringe. There were authors who participated only in Fringe. But as soon as they were staged, even by some experimental or some post-dramatic theatre, such as the Volkostrelov's Theatre Post (theatr post),<sup>19</sup> they were quickly moved from Fringe to the main program, maintaining their artistic integrity, like, for example, Ekaterina Augustenyak.<sup>20</sup>

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Well, yes, yes, this is the usual way.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** This Fringe mechanism started developing in front of my eyes. An author, first finds a form and it looks wild, and then they unify it. And when they show it for the first time, I mean show it to the audience, no one understands anything. Only one person would be passionate enough to endure the presentation enchanted till the end, and the next day they would write a post. A year later the same author would present a play, and there would be already eight people sitting there who considered themselves an elite audience, and who already understood everything. And then the general public, terribly proud of

<sup>19</sup> Dmitriy Volkostrelov (b. 1982) is a Russian stage director, founder and artistic leader of Theater Post in St. Petersburg, whose works are interdisciplinary, exploring new forms of theatre art. He lives in St. Petersburg.

<sup>20</sup> Ekaterina Augustenyak (b. 1984) is a Russian interdisciplinary artist and playwright based in St. Petersburg.

themselves, is drawn to this elitism, because they begin to understand in part what the appeal is.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Well, that was it. Lubimovka with all its branches existed perfectly and worked perfectly under your team leadership, but nevertheless, these creative leaders left in 2018 and handed over the fate of the festival to the next generation of playwrights. How and why did it happen?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Well, there wasn't any established law or a corresponding mechanism. The leadership change was always connected with personal stories... But now I am aware that already to us, to our art directorate, this tradition was passed. And in the fifth year of our leadership, I suddenly realised that what we were adding and would be able to add to Lubimovka were improvements, but not groundbreaking changes, that we wouldn't be raising the quality of the festival to the next level.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** That is, you have exhausted the resources of your reforms at that time.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Yes. And we talked about it for quite a long time, because everyone wanted to stay. Everyone except me. And I said to others, listen, let's talk logically. As art leaders we may live up to the day when our work becomes completely breathless. We could be remembered as the team of the last year who brought Lubimovka to its demise. It is necessary to leave at the peak and make way for new people, a new team who will give the festival new horizons, from a fresh perspective.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** And how did these new faces, the new art directorate, come about?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** We understood that these would be people with passion and potential, those who have already proven themselves in some way and are doing something with a child's enthusiasm, and not only for themselves personally... We chose them ourselves and we selected seven people.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Those who are younger, but have already made significant progress as playwrights?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Well, more or less. For instance, Yura Shekhvatov leaned more on the administrative side.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Well, yes, he is charismatic and extremely productive as a producer.



**Mikhail Durnenkov:** And now he's basically carrying all the festival on his shoulders... But by 2019 a new team of leaders was formed. At first there were seven of them, then there were four. That is, almost half of them left because they could not work as a team, because this is also an art form.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Yes, this coming together is also a difficult thing...

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** But we didn't throw them into the deep end like puppies... We tried to share our experience with them... Take our team, for example, we quarrelled a lot until we came to dividing responsibilities. Everyone began to do what they liked. Personally, I liked to compose the program of the festival. I just felt inspired at that moment, and I also loved to invite celebrities, using my own contacts. I liked it, but I didn't like dealing with public relations in general. And so we tried for a long time to pass on our experience to them, but unfortunately, experience can't be conveyed in words. It was still an uphill battle and half of the team just dropped out. But those who remained<sup>21</sup> created a new beautiful and young art directorate of Lubimovka. It really was. And it is much more radical and more left-wing... And what was still sacred to us, what we considered sacred cows, no longer mattered to them...

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**Natalia Skorokhod:** For example?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** For example, I always tried to invite old people to these festivals although it was sometimes painful. Every year I invited those playwrights who had been coming to Lubimovka for twenty years to join the festival events. And they, the new team, didn't care about the old people at all, they didn't know who these old playwrights were... they did not feel any obligations, any historical ties.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** It was already a generation that lived on the Internet.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Absolutely.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** And then there was the broadcast, recording, archiving of all the events of the festival...

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Then the show appeared that was recorded with three cameras. Elements of a show appeared both at readings and during discussions.

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<sup>21</sup> The team of art directors (2019–2024): Yuri Shekhvatov (b. 1978) is a Russian stage-director and producer based in Germany; Maria Ogneva (b. 1988) is a Russian playwright, script maker, curator based in Moscow; Olzhas Zhanaidarov (b. 1980) is a Russian-Kazakhstani playwright and teacher based in Moscow; Polina Phor (b. 1996) is a theatre critic and curator based in New York.

They made high-quality videos of the play readings and when they lead discussions after each performance...

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Feeling like stars in those moments, being recorded by three cameras...

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Beautiful, young, fashionable. I must say that we also really liked the new team... There was a touch of madness in our leading style: night readings, when playwrights came to us, and some of them had a bottle of vodka in their pockets... Sometimes, it become very noisy and even turn into heated discussion... But this team already had green and purple lights on the stage, multicoloured bracelets for participants, a designated spot for selfies with the inscription "Lubimovka", and design everywhere. They belonged to another generation... completely different.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** And they got their share of troubles...

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Yes... First the pandemic, then the war. But the pandemic did not terrify this team, they were already preparing to hold Lubimovka online... -

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**Natalia Skorokhod:** Well, these new art directors somehow survived the pandemic, and then there came the war... Let's talk about it now. What about today? And what prospects do you see for the festival?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** It is clear that in a way the festival exists, but it will never be the same again. Even if the political situation becomes favourable, I think the circumstances will have changed so much by then that there will be return to how things used to be. This phenomenon of Lubimovka can already be studied.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** That is what we are doing right now. But nevertheless, which ideas or prospects can you see for the festival today, what are they?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Well, you should distinguish between my idea is of it and life, which unfolds differently, and even more interesting than our ideas about the future. There is an evolution happening that I can't even imagine. When the invasion started, we discussed what to do on a global scale and what to do with Lubimovka in the new historical context... Well, I say "we", although the main decisions were made by the new art directorate. But in such times, of course, we were together, and we all knew what we were discussing and even thinking about. We understood that any statements related to the political agenda would be severely suppressed this way or another. Yes, the art directorate and everyone

who identified themselves with Lubimovka in one way or another had a clear awareness that we needed to make a statement on behalf of the festival. We needed to express our position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but our hands were tied, and our thoughts were clouded by the fact that many of us were still there, in Russia... What followed proved that we were right. You surely remember that on the very first day of the invasion, Yura Shekhvatov was detained for participating in street protests and spent a month in a cell...

**Natalia Skorokhod:** And now he bears the brunt of this process...

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Yes, and what's even worse is that his wife, playwright Sveta Petriychuk, was detained because of the play *Finist – the Bright Falcon* (*Phinist Yasnyi Sokol*), which premiered at Lubimovka.<sup>22</sup> This also poses a kind of danger to the whole process. In connection with the Berkovich-Petriychuk case, other people linked to the festival were called in for questioning, to put it cautiously. Lubimovka is of particular interest to the investigation of this case as the institution where the so-called “distribution” of the play suspected of justifying terrorism took place...

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**Natalia Skorokhod:** Everybody is following the Moscow trial... But let's go back to the end of February and the beginning of March 2022. You said that there were discussions about several options of Lubimovka's future in the new time scenario?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** In general, there are few options. First one is to stay in Russia and be self-censored, because otherwise the authors will be criminally prosecuted. Or stay in Russia and go into a closed format, for example, as it was in the first period since 1991, to hold a closed seminar somewhere in a small hotel or a tent camp somewhere on the Klyazma River, in the wilderness, in the forest.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** To go into internal emigration.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Yes, that's right. In the first case, we would probably keep the market of plays, the economic factor would work with this option. But we would lose everything else, including ourselves, probably, because all

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<sup>22</sup> On 5 May 2023, director and poet Zhenya Berkovich and playwright Svetlana Petriychuk were detained in Moscow. They were charged under the criminal law for “justification of terrorism” and their “crime” was nothing more than the artefact – the play and performance of *Finist the Bright Falcon*, which was staged by Moscow's small private company Soso's Daughters (*Dochery Soso*) in 2018. On 8 July 2024, the Second Western District Military Court convicted Evgenia Berkovich and Svetlana Petriychuk, sentencing them to six years in prison.

those components of Lubimovka that we've just talked about would disappear. Everything except professionalism. The second option means that there is no market for plays, but there is no censorship. It would be something like this: in this case, we are tending to the embers, waiting for winter to end. But this is also a risky business, because... Yes, life goes on, the aesthetic process goes on, and living in the forest means being preserved. To preserve drama, to move drama away from the theatre... Once upon a time in the 1990s it was possible... and now, it seems to me, not anymore, because dramaturgy is a part of a living, developing theatre. And then there is the third option — to take Lubimovka out of Russia, to preserve the principle of freedom, becoming sharply political, because... the proclamation of freedom, the very word now feels like shouting against the war...

**Natalia Skorokhod:** A political gesture?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Well, it's a political gesture, yes. Yes, it's an absolutely political gesture, and it immediately cuts off 600 of our 800 annual authors, who simply will not participate in anything political because they are afraid.<sup>23</sup> Well, and there is something to be afraid of. In this third scenario, we again lose touch with theatre, because no one will stage these plays in Russia, and no one will stage them abroad either. Because it is... well, the language barrier, yes, and how... Yes, and it is mostly written for a Russian audience. In the end, everything is lost except for self-respect. But we thought that only in this third scenario would we be able to reignite it, that is, to restart Lubimovka in the future. If we take the festival out, we make this gesture. Then, it won't be us, but others, who will be able to say that Lubimovka in Moscow, in the beautiful Russia of the future, is opening in a new format, with a new look. The festival has not discredited itself and is able to continue. Yes, maybe in other formats. In other formats, other people, other generations, maybe it will be in thirty years, but you see, there is a chance to survive. Yes, Lubimovka has emigrated, but it hasn't stopped. And we considered this to be the only way to save the festival for the future, and, of course, there are only disadvantages to it.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Why?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Emigration – well, it's scattering, if we look at this process historically. And if we look at Russian emigration, through all its waves... we won't see anything comforting.

<sup>23</sup> It is now clear that authors who live in Russia and Belarus are still participating in the Lubimovka competition. Some of them hide their real names.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** What do you mean, what is scattering?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Russian universities. There were universities in Harbin, and after the first wave, there were three Russian universities, as far as I know, with numerous faculties where Russian professors taught Russian students. And then all this disappeared, just dissipated. The culture you live in, the society where you act, absorbs you.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Well, on the one hand, emigrants are absorbed, but on the other, another emigrant seek to carry their culture as a mission, to bring it into another culture. Russian emigration has produced geniuses, geniuses of Russian literature, for example. So, this soil is also fertile. It depends on how you look at it...

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Yes, it is partly a question of perspective. But from my point of view, it seems to me that when this process, the Echo of Lubimovka in emigration, suddenly began – that is, the festivals of play-readings that are now taking place all over the world – it was driven by the energy of people who recently moved. And who are still staying together and still retain the warmth of that Moscow Lubimovka. It seems to me that this was something that mattered to them most of all.

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**Natalia Skorokhod:** Yes, of course. But for whatever reason, the festival is still alive. We are speaking to you in Finland, where the last, tenth, by my count, event of the Lubimovka Echo of the current season has just concluded. It was a festival of play-reading organised by the forces of Kira Mirutenko and her theatre, which has been active in the university city of Jyväskylä for many years. And among the performers, the audience, and the organisers, there were no emigrants from the last wave, except for you and me. How do you still rate the first season of Lubimovka in exile? This scope: Narva, Haifa, Almaty, Yerevan, Paris, Berlin, Tel Aviv, Granada, and so on...

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** So, I was in Granada this summer and listened to Lena Gordienko<sup>24</sup> from Paris, she gave a lecture about the Lubimovka Echo, and she called it a "movement".

**Natalia Skorokhod:** A movement? Well, yes, I also call it a movement. And did that surprise you?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Yes, I was surprised, because, once more, I thought it more as an emergency first-aid kit for emigrants, something to make them feel

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<sup>24</sup> Elena Gordienko (1988), a Russian philologist, researcher of contemporary Russophone dramaturgy based in Paris.

that they hadn't left just to save themselves, but also to express themselves. And the Lubimovka Echo is a way of speaking.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Yes, of course. And what's wrong with it?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** In this heartbreaking world, Russian emigration now lives quite safely, that is why any direct political gesture on its part looks ambiguous and not obvious. But at the Lubimovka Echo, at least those festivals I attended, there was no ambiguity at all. Lubimovka turned out to be productive in this sense. And there were Ukrainian authors who decided for themselves, yes, it's not shameful for me to participate in Lubimovka. And they participated.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** And they participate.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** This is some kind of a new phenomenon for me. In the first year of Lubimovka in exile, there was a whirlwind of offers, discussions, broadcasts... Along with a new separate competition of anti-war plays, which is now widely used. This Lubimovka competition does not have a deadline, such plays can be submitted at any time. And this particular one, which is called perpetual, open-call for anti-war plays, is the hottest and most effective. Because if you left and you want to speak out, then this is it. Well, if you haven't left and you also want to speak out, then you can speak out under a pseudonym and no one will know that it's you. And back to Granada, during the discussion, I started talking and stopped. I suddenly felt that something new was happening to the festival, something that I had not anticipated. You know, when we chose this third option, we couldn't have imagined that this would happen, that Lubimovka would become an international movement. I certainly did not count on it.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** And by the way, returning to what was left unsaid, the festival did not make a political statement then, but Lubimovka announced a new program, a new competition of anti-military plays... And this is more than an official statement.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Yes, yes, yes... And this new, separate competition is now most frequently used. This competition has no deadline, such plays can be submitted at any time. I am one of the readers and I read and select plays...

**Natalia Skorokhod:** And which play do you think is the strongest among those you have already read?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Well, the best of the best? Let me think... There's another question. Are we talking about the strongest or the coolest?

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Yes, this is the question.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** It seems that *Crime* is very painful.<sup>25</sup>

**Natalia Skorokhod:** Yes, this is a play full of suffering.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** Excruciating. And it completely conveys the feelings that you experienced...

**Natalia Skorokhod:** I agree, which all of us experienced in one way or another during the first days of this war. And it turns out that this competition for anti-war plays reflects Lubimovka's position, not explicitly formulated, but still expressed in this form. And these anti-war plays are in high demand at Lubimovka Echo, in all parts of the world.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** But let's see what comes out of the next season. Well, I mean, I wonder if there will be Lubimovka Echo festivals in major European capitals next season as there were this season. In any case, it has always been a sincere gesture, organised by the efforts of volunteers, and this is also Lubimovka's tradition.

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**Natalia Skorokhod:** To organise a festival without any funding?

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** We never discussed it openly, but it is important to stress now that Lubimovka has always been a volunteer-run, non-profit festival, from its very beginning, independent of the state for most part of its life. The state has never been the founder of the festival – never. To be exact, at the very beginning, it was a seminar under the STD umbrella. It was the Theatre Union of the USSR which supported it. In other words, it was funded not by Russia, but by a completely different state, one that no longer exists. Yes, yes... And already in the new century, playwrights relied on their own fundraising efforts. To be exact, in either 2002 or 2004, the Russian Ministry of Culture financed the festival, but only once. Originally, there was no state funding because the Ministry simply did not want to give money to the DOC theatre, to Mikhail Ugarov, because the DOC was partly a political theatre. When the management of the festival was passed on to our team, we deliberately distanced ourselves from the state money, since by that point, it was no longer possible to deal with this state. There was already the Crimean issue and the Belarusian “white ribbons” uprising, and we understood that if we wanted to work with authors from Belarus and Ukraine, if

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<sup>25</sup> *Crime #AlwaysArmUkraine*, a play by Ester Bol (the official new name of Asya Voloshina [1985]), a respectable Russian and European playwright based in Paris.



we valued these communications, we had to distance ourselves from the Russian state. From the state and its money, yes. After the annexation of Crimea, we changed the name of the festival. It became a festival of Russophone drama, that is, the festival that accepted plays written in Russian – that was the only criterion. We even gradually removed the age limits, pushed them back, so to speak. This language criterion was the only one left to make it clear that the Russian language is the one thing that unites us, connects us and define us. Yes.

**Natalia Skorokhod:** At this point, you can put a semicolon, right? Yes, we've lost the territory, we've lost our work and houses, we've lost our audience, but language is something that unites us, anyway. And now we live on the territory of the Russian language. That's it.

**Mikhail Durnenkov:** That's it.

#### ADDENDUM BY NATALIA SKOROKHOD

I would like to add an update about the Lubimovka Festival. In 2024, a new artistic directorate of Lubimovka was introduced. It consists of four women: Elena Gordienko, a philologist based in France; Zukhra Yanikova, a playwright based in Montenegro; Nastya Patlay, a director based in Spain; and Natalia Lisorkina, a playwright based in Germany. All four are artists and/or scholars living in exile. In the second half of 2024, the readings of the shortlisted plays from the 2023 Lubimovka were released as audio performances in collaboration with Radio Sakharov. The recordings are available in Russian at <https://tinyurl.com/5ephuv56>. It is also worth noting that Echo Lubimovka is still active. The most recent event was held in Tallinn, Estonia, on 13–14 March 2025, organised in collaboration with the Russian Theatre of Estonia (Vene Theatre).