

For Yukhananov, There Aren't Enough Genres

By John Freedman

STAFF WRITER

Boris Yukhananov is nothing if not a fount of ideas.

Yes, he is an avant-garde theater director, an experimental video filmmaker and one of the most influential and colorful figures in Russian underground performance art of the last 10 years. But even a short talk with this pensive artist with a mesmerizing voice leaves no doubt: There probably aren't enough genres and different kinds of art to satisfy his hunger for dreaming up, playing with and realizing ideas.

Maybe that is why Yukhananov once almost seriously proposed carrying out a series of "theatrical terrorist acts," wherein his actors would burst into performances at other theaters and play out their own scenes before making quick exits.

It may also be why he was so intrigued when two years ago a psychologist friend suggested he try working with some people with Down's syndrome. He jumped at the chance, and the result has been a series of new ventures at his Studio of Individual Directing.

In addition to adding the Down's syndrome actors to his unorthodox seven-hour, two-day production of "The Orchard," an interpretation of Anton Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard," he has initiated a project called "Down People, or the Hunt for Golden Birds." It involves a theatrical production called "Craig," based on dialogues written by the turn-of-the-century English director Gordon Craig, and a video film called "Down People Come to the World."

Yukhananov has been "amazed" by his Down's syndrome actors. "Their internal personality is developed much more highly than ours," he says, "and they fantasize much more quickly than we do. I teach them nothing. I simply try to enter into contact with them, keeping their gestures, live reactions and improvisations."

All of it is just one more facet of what Yukhananov calls his "research" of directing, an art form which he points out is still very young, having come into being only in the 20th century.

"I study directing and its possibilities," he says, "before I break up into the directing of a video, a film or a piece of theater. You can't put your finger on what the director does."

Yukhananov, 39, began his career 10 years ago with an undertaking whose wit, imagination and scope set the tone for everything that has come since. With a few like-minded colleagues, he created what he calls the "first underground theater in the Soviet Union" or the "first wave of post-Soviet underground." He named it the Theater Theater.

"We did that at a time when everything was doubling," he says, referring to the forces that were about to begin breaking everything from state structures to prominent Moscow theaters in two.

But merely reflecting social trends in his art was not enough. He also wanted, by his own admission, to do nothing less than "remove" the competitive, occasionally hostile relationship that has existed



Boris Yukhananov, center, on the set. From proposing "theatrical terrorist acts" to casting of Down's syndrome actors, he has stayed ahead of the curve.

between Moscow and St. Petersburg for nearly 250 years. The idea was to set up a two-city theater that, through development and interaction, would bring the two capitals closer together.

The Theater Theater appropriately debuted on April 1, 1986, with a street performance of Molière's "The Misanthrope" on the Arbat. It later continued its progression in Leningrad in an imaginative show called "Mon Repos."

Starring the Leningrad actor Nikita Mikhailovsky, whose apartment was Yukhananov's Leningrad base, it was performed in and around an abandoned building. According to legend, the great Russian philosopher Pyotr Chaadaev was held there in the 1830s by the tsarist police and forcibly "treated" for "insanity."

"The spectators," explains Yukhananov, "gathered on the street and were led by a silent guide past outdoor scenes. Then they would enter the building and the guide would turn on his flashlight, illuminating various other scenes for them."

Ultimately, they would reach a tower on the top floor with two windows. From the obstructed view of one window, it seemed to them that Mikhailovsky, who would soon die of leukemia, leaped off a roof to his death reciting the poetry of Joseph Brodsky. When the observers were led to

"I saw in 1989 that I had to come up with another approach," he says. "I wanted to survive."

The Studio—based in, supported by but independent of Anatoly Vasilyev's famous School of Dramatic Art—is involved in a multitude of activities, from the Good Films Agency, which shows experimental video films at the Cinema Museum, to ambitious theatrical undertakings, such as the work with Down's syndrome actors.

Yukhananov has twice taken his troupe to England, most recently in September to the prestigious Edinburgh Festival, and he is on the verge of striking a deal to make an hour-long film of "The Orchard" for German television.

"The Orchard" remains the keystone of all the Studio's endeavors, which in one way or another are aimed at creating or at least discovering modern myths and mythological systems. Having gone through five incarnations since it was first created in 1990, the production is purposefully changed by Yukhananov. "If it doesn't change," he says, "it will die."

Due to summer schedule the Stage page will appear in Friday's edition for the next three weeks.