
Developments in Japan and Overseas

Continuing Creating After Leaving My Homeland

An interview with director Timofey Kulyabin

Interviewer: Uchida Kensuke

(Part-time lecturer at Chiba University and researcher of Russian theatre)

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Timofey Kulyabin

Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and as of November, eight months have passed with no sign of an end to the fighting. During this period, there has been a movement among Japanese theatre professionals and theatre researchers who love Russian theatre and have established an amicable relation with it, to support stage performers from both Russia and Ukraine and to learn about the current situation. So how are those Russian theatre people doing now?

The Japanese Centre of International Theatre Institute interviewed Timofey Kulyabin, a director currently based in Germany who received acclaim in 2019 for his *Three Sisters*, which was performed entirely in sign language at the Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre. We asked him about what he has

been thinking and feeling from the invasion to the present and how he has continued his work as a theatre artist.

After February 24, everything changed

I heard that you were working on an opera in Prague on February 24, the day Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine. Could you tell us how you felt that day?

TK: I was shocked, of course. It was a huge shock to both me and my colleagues. I think our fear outweighed our surprise at being faced with such an unexpected situation. Our lives changed forever after that day. You might even say that a new life began.

You immediately posted an anti-war statement on Instagram. Many other artists too made anti-war statements in various forms. However, on March 4, the so-called “Fake News Law” was enacted as a presidential decree, and now it’s a crime to oppose the war, or even to hope for peace, and Russia has become completely devoid of freedom of speech.

TK: Now, in Russia, simply publicly speaking out against the war can land you in jail, and leaving the country is very difficult. It’s like the whole country has been hijacked and taken hostage.

Recently, *Theatre Magazine* editor-in-chief Marina Davydova and the director Dmitry Krymov have left the country, but those remaining in the country are having a difficult time. On April 21, you resigned as artistic director of the Krasny Fakel (“Red Torch”) Theatre in Novosibirsk. Was that related to your anti-war statement?

TK: Yes, of course.

Was your resignation voluntary?

TK: Well, it’s a very complicated story, but the truth is that they made me prepare a document saying I was resigning “for personal reasons” and told me to sign it. The Russian Federal



Uchida Kensuke
Photo: Ayada Shoichi

Security Service (FSB), what used to be called the KGB, contacted the theatre and told us that if Timofey Kulyabin continued to make anti-war statements, the entire theatre would be held responsible. They were even prepared to fire my parents, who also work at the theatre. So I was forced to announce that I was quitting on my own for personal reasons.

I didn't realize such pressures were actually put on you... Performances have continued at the Krasny Fasel Theatre since your resignation, but is the government still pressuring them? If you just could tell us whatever you can...

TK: I'm sure that the theatre group members are feeling terrible pressure and are depressed. I have been communicating with them by e-mail, and since the mobilization order was issued on September 21, many of them, especially the young actors, are very anxious about being sent to the war zone. Some of them have left Russia.

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The Theatre had a donation box to support the Donbass region of Ukraine and held a charity festival in October. Is that related to such pressures?

TK: I don't know if the charity event in support of the Donbass region was a voluntary theatre project. But there were similar events for political propaganda even before the war started. Not long ago everything was about "liberating the people of the Donbass from Nazis," and more recently "liberating them from Satanists," but either way, the government remains in control. Unfortunately, Russia is not a free country.

In Moscow, you worked with the Bolshoi Theatre and Teatr Naciy (the Theatre of Nations). Have you kept in touch?

TK: As you know, the Bolshoi has removed my works from their repertoire, and they have not contacted me. Teatr Naciy is still performing some of my works, such as Chekhov's *Ivanov* and Kleist's *The Broken Jug*, so I'm sure we will remain connected in some way. However, a number of the actors who were in those productions have left the country, so I don't know all the details...

Theatrical artists are leaving the country one after another

Chulpan Khamatova, who appeared in *Ivanov*, relocated to Latvia and is now working with the New Riga Theatre (Jaunais Rigas Teatris).

TK : Khamatova is a well-known actress, so her defection was a big topic, but I have heard that quite a few other actors have also left the country, including Ingeborga Dapkunaite , who was in *Burnt by the Sun* (1994, directed by Nikita Mikhalkov).

In May you directed Bernard-Marie Koltes' *In the Solitude of Cotton Fields* at the Dailes Teatris in Riga.

TK : Yes, Khamatova came to us on the first day of *Cotton Fields*. We are friends, so we know each other's situation.

The play and film director Kirill Serebrennikov has also left the country, recently directing *The Decameron* at the Deutsches Theater Berlin, where you directed *Platonov* this past October. Are you in contact with him as well?

TK : Yes, that's right. Two years ago, Kirill and I held rehearsals at the Deutsches Theater at about the same time. He directed *The Decameron* and I directed *Miss Julie*. This was just when the COVID pandemic was starting, and Germany went under lockdown about a week after the first showing of *The Decameron*. Kirill and I are acquaintances, or friends or something, something hard to define, but we are both similar in that we are expressing our anti-war stance from outside of Russia.

Seventh Studio, a project Serbrennikov represented, was



In the Solitude of Cotton Fields (2022), Dailes Teatris
Photo: Māris Morkāns

Miss Julie (2021), Deutsches Theater Berlin Photo: Arno Declair



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accused of embezzling public funds, and you too were involved in a scandal in which the religious community sued you for your production of *Tannhäuser*. So it seems to me that the two of you are in similar positions.

In your recent work with the Deutsches Theater and the National Theatre in Prague, have you experienced any inconvenience in presenting your work because you are Russian? Is there any kind of cancellation movement against Russian culture?

TK : I have never experienced anything like that. I think stories about Russian productions being cancelled or hostility to Russian culture are just myths or rumors. Rather, I feel that in Germany everyone became more sympathetic and cooperative toward Russian-speaking artists after the war started. Of course, this may be partly because I opposed the war from the beginning.

Well I'm glad to hear that.

Censorship and Suppression of *Tannhäuser*

Again, please tell us about *Tannhäuser*, which premiered at the Novosibirsk

Opera and Ballet Theatre in 2014. Your staging of the young Christ in place of the medieval knight Tannhäuser, who was consumed by lust, was decried by the Church as an insult to the faith and taken to court. In the end, the court ruled that there was no criminality involved and the production was allowed to continue, but the authorities later intervened, *Tannhäuser* was removed from the repertoire, and the manager, Boris Mezdrich, was fired. I think that was an important case in terms of the religious community and the government using legislation to pressure the arts.

TK : *Tannhäuser* is just one example. It was total censorship. But what I want everyone to understand is that “religion” and “the Church” are two completely different things. It is actually not religion or faith that negatively impacts the art world, but the organization, the Russian Orthodox Church. We can even consider the Church as a criminal organization. The military, politicians, and the Church are three entities responsible for the functioning of the Russian government, and all three should be discussed equally. In my personal opinion, the Church deserves to be tried in international court.

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Patriarch Kirill supports the current war, doesn't he. And not only your plays, but also productions like Konstantin Raikin's LGBT-themed *All Shades of Blue* have been sabotaged by the authorities and Orthodox Church activists. I agree with your opinion that the Church should be tried as a tool of the government.

TK : The Russian Orthodox Church today acts in collusion with the Putin regime and is responsible for their propaganda. It works as an extension of the government based on a logic that has nothing to do with faith. So I think we have to consider



Tannhäuser (2014), Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theatre
Photo: Viktor Dmitriev

religion and faith as something completely separate from religious organizations.

Creating “one and only” works

Chekhov's *Three Sisters* was a truly wonderful production that was performed in Japan in 2019. I went to the theatre every day and watched every performance.

TK: Thank you very much

There was a bit of a slip-up on the last day. In the scene where Olga borrows a key from Andrei, there was no key on the stage. I got goosebumps seeing them have a proper sign language conversation about it and getting through the scene nonetheless. The actors didn't just memorize signs for their dialogue, they must have really mastered sign language. It must have taken them a lot of time and effort to reach that point. Did the actors not object to the use of sign language in the production?

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TK: No, not at all. [laughs]

It seems most people would think that having studied sign language that much, they'd want to do at least one more production in sign language.

TK: I didn't really think that way. The important thing was to make something experimental, something unlike anything else.

It was indeed unlike anything else. It was a historic production in the history of Chekhov productions.

Editor: In *Three Sisters*, there were many moments in every scene where despair and hope clash. I felt that such a work could only be created by drawing something out of the actors themselves, rather than by how they read the dialogue.

TK: I think so, too.



Editor: What are the minimal qualities that you look for in an actor?

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TK : When I started college, I was asked the very same question: “What is the most important quality for an actor?” I couldn’t decide on one, because there are many aspects to being an actor. One day I asked Pyotr Fomenko, the professor director, “What are the most important qualities for an actor?” What do you think he answered? “Depends on the actor.” [laughs]

Did you choose the Deutsches Theater’s *Platonov* yourself?

TK : The Theatre offered me that one. *Platonov* is a very long play, so I rewrote it with a dramaturge. We rewrote it about five times, editing out characters and several scenes.

Yes, it would be a seven- or eight-hours if you tried to stage it as-is. In the original, four women appear along with the main character, Platonov, but in your production, the characters are all elderly.

TK : I set the play in a nursing home and staged it so that all the characters except

Platonov (2022), Deutsches Theater Berlin Photo: Arno Declair



Platonov die at the end. Some of them die of old age. While *Platonov* is outdated in some ways, it also has a very innocent side, and I wanted to emphasize that. The characters look old, but they act like youths and children. These old people share the fate that they have little time left until their death. But they have their own lives, and just like young

people, they fall in love, get into trouble, come together, and fall apart. I wanted to show that this is what motivates them to live.

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You have directed *Three Sisters*, *Ivanov*, and now *Platonov*. What is the significance of Chekhov as a writer for you?

TK: Let's see... Chekhov is a great playwright. Unlike a novel, a play is expressed in the form of dialogue, and I think the secret of a Chekhov performance lies in how its dialogue is structured. He is deeply observant of people and extremely intelligent in what he puts into his dialogues and the words he uses for them. I believe he is a writer who has written interesting works that will never be boring, even in this day and age.

Themes of "modernization" and "forgetting"

You often change the setting of your productions to the present day. For example, you produced *Oedipus* as a contemporary mystery. Modernization itself is not an uncommon take, everyone tries it and usually fails, but your works always have the strength to reach the audience. I think that comes from the depth at which you read the text, but how do you undergo your interpretation and reconstruction?

TK : The time required varies according to the piece, but when reconstructing a text, I consult with the dramaturge and discuss it with the stage designer, reading the work very deeply and paying close attention to various details.

You mentioned that when you directed *Macbeth* in 2008, you compared seven or eight different translations. Did you learn that kind of reading at GITIS (the Russian Institute of Theatre Arts)?

TK : It is a technique I developed in my own way. The text reflects my tastes and preferences. Even if it is a classic, the audience who watches the play will be a modern audience. I believe that the people speaking on stage and those watching the play—in other words, the actors and the audience—should speak the same language. Therefore, even if the story takes place in ancient Greece, the actors should speak in modern language.

Editor: From past interviews, I get the sense that along with themes like “my existence does not fit these times or this place” and “this is not my place” that are common across your works, you often use the words “abandoned” and “forgotten.” As an example, the characters in *Three Sisters* are forced to live in



Eugene Onegin (2012), Krasny Fakel Theatre (From a streamed video)

the countryside, even though Moscow is where they should be. They have the feeling that their existence will one day be forgotten. Do you have any special feelings about words or concepts like “forgotten” and “abandoned”?

TK: Yes, forgetting is a major theme in *Eugene Onegin* as well. People change and are forgotten. That a forgotten person is forever lost is an idea that forms the basis of Russian literature. The absurdity is that when we die, we will be forgotten, and given that, why do we live? This is a universal theme in art. It is difficult to find a theme within myself, but I think “forgetting” is probably an important keyword for me.

A new work on the theme of war

Editor: When does inspiration come to you in your creative process?

TK: It’s different every time. Inspiration is not something we can control; it has to come on its own. Inspiration often comes to me suddenly while I am working.

Do you plan to make a production about the current situation between Russia and Ukraine?

TK: Of course. I think my next work will have war as its theme.

Please tell us about the concept for your next work, if you can.

TK: In April 2023, I will be staging *Macbeth* at Schauspiel Frankfurt. It will be a very new interpretation of *Macbeth*, quite different from the show I directed in 2008. After that, I will be putting on Brecht’s *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* at the Russian Theatre in Tallinn, Estonia. As for opera work, I will be directing Tchaikovsky’s *The Queen of Spades* at the Opéra National de Lyon.

I’ll definitely have to go to Europe to see that. [laughs] Please come to Japan again. There are many people here who love your work.

By the way, have you always been interested in Japan? The music video for Madonna’s song “Jump” you used in *Eugene Onegin* featured dancers

performing parkour on the streets of Tokyo, and the music playing during the duel between Lensky and Onegin was “Yearning,” a song by the Japanese band Mono.

TK : I’m the one who selected Mono. I’m a specialist, so I know everything. [laughs] I would love to visit Japan again. I am very attracted to Japan. I like it so much you could even say I’ve fallen in love with it. I have only seen Tokyo, but I would love to visit the countryside as well, since all megalopolises are similar to some extent.

Well I live in the countryside, so please come visit my home. Thank you very much for speaking with us today. We’ve had a wonderful time. Like Nina in *The Seagull* meeting her crush Trigorin, I want to shout “сон” (it’s like a dream)! [laughs]

TK : I hope we can meet in Japan. And please come to Europe anytime. I’ll be waiting for you.



Photo: Ayada Shoichi

After the interview

Uchida Kensuke

On December 22, about three months after this interview, Kulyabin’s productions of *The Wild Duck*, *Eugene Onegin*, and *Three Sisters* were removed from the repertoire of the Krasny Fabel Theatre, where Kulyabin had been artistic director. These three productions were signature works at that theatre, nominated for a Golden Mask award at Russia’s largest theatre festival, and although the Theatre gave the excuse of faulty equipment, there is no doubt that they were targeted by authorities and pressured to cancel those performances.

The next day, on the 23rd, Aleksandr Kulyabin, father of Timofey Kulyabin and general director at Krasny Fabel, was removed from his post. The local press

did not mention any reason for this, but it is likely because he was held jointly responsible for his son Timofey, who was operating from overseas.

On the 24th, Kulyabin posted a message on Facebook. He began by stating that this decision was not by choice of those working at Krasny Fakel, and after thanking everyone at the theatre, including his father, and writing that he was proud of the work they had accomplished together, he concluded by saying:

“Two years ago, we performed and presented an anniversary play called *My 'Red Torch'*. I came up with the name and it was important to me that everyone on and off the stage could say that the theatre was ‘mine.’ Whatever happens, it’s mine—and ours—and no one can take it away.”

Kulyabin, Timofey

Born in 1984 in Izhevsk, capital of the Soviet Udmurt Republic. Graduated from the Russian Institute of Theatre Arts (GITIS) in 2007, he received high acclaim as a director early on. He won Russia’s most prestigious theatre award, the Golden Mask, for his productions of *Eugene Onegin* in 2012 and *Three Sisters* in 2015. In 2015, he was appointed artistic director of the Krasny Fakel Theatre in Novosibirsk Oblast (until 2022). He has directed many operas and is currently continuing his creative work in various places in Europe.

Uchida, Kensuke

Part-time lecturer at Chiba University and visiting researcher at the Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum at Waseda University. Specializes in Russian theatre and the history of theatrical exchange between Japan and Russia. He is also active as a dramaturge and playwright, and he currently offers Russian language courses and provides Russian theatre news on YouTube. His recent co-authored works include *An Encyclopedia of Russian Culture* (2019, Maruzen), *Anthology of Western Theatre Theory* (2019, Getsuyosha), and *Kabuki and Revolutionary Russia* (2017, Shinwasha). In 2022, his new translation of Chekhov’s *The Seagull* was published by Ronsosha.

(Writing: Sakaguchi Kaya / Translation: Tony Gonzalez)