

## LES IDIOTS

Through improvisations and extrapolations, Kirill Serebrennikov and his actors of the Gogol Center offer an updated version of Lars von Trier's *The Idiots*, retaining its economy of means and its pared-down aesthetics. Set in the Moscow of today, it follows a group of youths who decide to upset decorum and modesty by letting their inner imbecile take over. While Lars von Trier's characters belonged to a Danish society known for its calm and tolerance, Kirill Serebrennikov's encounter a people whose standards aren't quite as flexible. Focusing on this contrast between very strict conventions and the rejection of the rules of propriety, the Russian director brings "idiots" and "non-idiots" face to face on stage, in order to question the actual role absurdity plays in human and social relationships, not only in Moscow but also everywhere else. In a society where any perceived behavioural failing can lead to anger and violence, Lars von Trier's initially amusing and idealistic experiment takes a turn for the dangerous, acquiring an inevitably subversive significance.

Show premiered on 24 May, 2013 at the Gogol Center, Moscow (Russia).

## KIRILL SEREBRENNIKOV

Kirill Serebrennikov was born in 1969 in Rostov, in southeast Russia. Originally destined to a career in physics, in 1992 he finds himself celebrating his graduation in the school theatre. In 2001, he directs Vassily Sigarev's *Plasticine* at the Dramatic Art and Direction Center Theater in Moscow. His shows – among which Mark Ravenhill's *Some Explicit Polaroids*, Maxim Gorky's *The Petty Bourgeois*, Bertold Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, Mikhail Bulgakov's *Zoyka's Apartment*, and Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* – thereafter play at the Pushkin Drama Theatre, at the Sovremennik Theatre, and at the Moscow Art Theatre. Kirill Serebrennikov has also directed many operas in such theaters as the Bolshoi, the Mariinsky and the Komische Oper Berlin. He received an award in 1999 for his work in television, and has worked as a director for the cinema since 1998, winning the Best Film award at the International Rome Film Festival in 2006 for *Playing the Victim*. He participated in the main competition of the Venice Film Festival with *Betrayal (Izmena)* and in the Locarno Film Festival with *Yuri's Day (Yuriev Day)*. Kirill Serebrennikov has been the artistic director of the «Territory» International festival of modern art since 2005, as well as the artistic director of the new Gogol Center since its reopening in Moscow in 2012.

## INTERVIEW WITH KIRILL SEREBRENNIKOV

***The Idiots* is the second play in a trilogy based on three films. Is there a common theme that unites those three films, or their directors?**

Kirill Serebrennikov: As soon as the Gogol Center reopened, I came back to an idea that's been following for a long time: adapt for the stage some great films, or rather, my favourite films. I thought they needed to be from the 1960s (Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and his Brothers*), from the 1970s (Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (*Angst essen Seele auf*)), and from the 1990s (Lars von Trier's *The Idiots*), to look back on different decades, different generations, with stories that all take place in modern cities. I immediately thought my adaptations should all take place in the same city: Moscow. It's really a trilogy about Moscow. It's about problems and questions we're facing here and now. I knew I would direct *The Idiots* myself. However, I asked my friend Alexey Mizgirev, a famous Russian director, to work on *Rocco and his Brothers*, and Vladislav Nastashev, a young and talented Lithuanian director, to do the same with *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*.

**You have directed both plays and films. How do you alternate between those two disciplines? Would you say that you're trying to explore the limits of one medium with the means of the other, and vice versa?**

If I work for the theatre for a while, I need a period of adaptation before coming back to cinema because it's as if the theatre and cinema required me to use different muscles. With *The Idiots*, I wondered how I could apply the rules of *Dogme 95* to the theatre, with the methods of the stage. I discovered that, although they were conceived as a manifesto, a sort of cinematic extremism, those rules are very theatrical. Their goal is to limit the usual means a director can use by rejecting *clichés* and overused techniques that have lost all meaning. There is a similar need to upset old forms in the theatre. With *The Idiots*, we were looking for a new dramatic truth. Its being the first show I directed after my arrival at the Gogol Center was significant. I see it not only as the manifestation of the cinematic principles of *Dogme 95*, but also as a way to express our own dogma. We are trying to build a democratic theatre, with minimalist means of expression. Everything is focused on the actors, who are the why and the how of what we do. This material was therefore consistent with the idea of renewal that the Gogol Center is trying to bring the theatre.

**What were the aspects of the film that most influenced the creation of the play?**

The film invited us to dream. The show is a collective creation into which the actors poured a lot of themselves. We started running into problems with adapting the film to a Russian setting very early. In Lars von Trier's film, the idiots test the West, its tolerance, its sternness, its dedication to the laws of respect, its values. There's no tolerance in Russia, human life there isn't worth anything, everything has been upended. Our idiots are in a much more dangerous situation. In the play, characters die when they try to take on the system. It's the story of people who want a world that would be only for them, a closed world based on their illusions, where they could follow their own laws. But this closed world is destroyed, because it is a provocation to the outside world. The illusion cannot endure.

**What do you think is the relationship between acting like an idiot and creating a play?**

In Russia, “to act like an idiot” is very dangerous, because society sees it as a provocation. The creation of a play is an artistic endeavour, which people more or less understand. In fact, it turns out that people don’t really understand that. In our country, it’s impossible to be an idiot without crossing the not-exactly-permissive line that defines taboos. This line is very close to the individual, to his or her dignity and sense of self: you just have to hold your arm out to cross it. Which is what makes our idiots such dissidents. They want first and foremost to protect themselves, fence themselves in from reality as they understand it. They’re ambitious, they think they can trick this reality, dupe it. They try to change reality and fail. The reality that is ours, in Russia, ruthlessly breaks people round us, without even noticing. To be able to do something unique is a luxury, to be able to listen to your own vibrations, to focus on an inner process. It is a similar luxury to what we are trying to find in our work in the theatre.

**Is happiness, even if it seems ephemeral, only possible within a small group that cuts itself off from the crowd? What were the social norms you wanted to look at?**

Happiness isn’t something that’s possible in a group, only within an individual. My position is clear, it is my certainty that the theatre, and art in general, shouldn’t take part in all those games that rule Russia. Society is divided between “this is ours” and “this isn’t.” “Those are long-toothed liberals” and “those are unbearable nationalists and slavophiles, warmongers and standard-bearers.” It’s a primitive and stupid approach. Firstly because it’s monstrous, then because art cannot be about division. Art tries to sympathise with both sides, or at least is interested in what both sides have to say. In our play, actors play either idiots or non-idiots. I thought it was crucial to understand how the non-idiots feel. This uncertainty shows that the world is indeed not only primitive, not just black or white.

**Doesn’t inviting impaired people to come onstage with the actors break the rules of the game established during the show?**

Right from the start, we wanted to have a scene in which our “fake” idiots would meet “real” ones—the actors suffering from Down’s syndrome of the Theatre of the Open-Hearted, one of our long-time partners. When we tried interacting with them, we understood that, much like in the film, when the characters encounter angels, there’s no longer any reason to keep playing. That’s what happened here, too: I understood that if we used that as an element of the show, it would become impossible for the actors to play. That’s when I had the idea of having them come on stage for the finale, which then took this very different turn.

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Interview conducted by Marion Canelas / Translation Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

## LES IDIOTS BY LARS VON TRIER

Lars von Trier directed *The Idiots* in 1998, following the rules of *Dogme 95*. This movement, whose manifesto he wrote with Thomas Vinterberg, director of *Festen*, included two other Danish directors, Søren Kragh-Jacobsen and Kristian Levring, and rejected the technological and commercial tendencies of modern cinema to focus on the sobriety and economy of means they thought would help bring it back to its essence. Masquerading as a documentary, *The Idiots* is a fiction that follows the experiment of a group of Danish youths determined to do away with the stupidity that surrounds them by letting their “inner idiot” show.

#IDIOTS

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