

STAGING THE UNSPEAKABLE: THEATRE, WITNESS, AND ETHICAL RISK IN LATE PUTIN-ERA RUSSIA

 TRUSTRUM-THOMAS, Alex. *Russian Theatre at the Margins of High Putinism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025. 219 pp. ISBN 978-0198971115.

The historiography of Russian culture in the twenty-first century is structured around oscillations between stagnation and rupture. The book *Russian Theatre at the Margins of High Putinism* by Alex Trustrum-Thomas (2025) explores the experimental and independent theatre in Russia in the decade before the full invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The book is based on a doctoral dissertation and deals mostly with the marginal theatrical practices of Moscow between 2012 and 2022—a period that the author calls “High Putinism”. Trustrum-Thomas suggests that marginal theatres, despite increased state control, censorship, and cultural conservatism, produced agency through ethical challenges and dissent, challenging monolithic accounts of Russian society.

The book is structured into four major chapters; the first discusses the nature of documentary theatre and how it has evolved from “zero position” to “witness theatre” at Teatr.doc; the second explains the concept of “new documentarism” in document-based performance, the third examines body politics in New Drama, and the fourth one explores “actionist theatre” as practiced by collectives

such as Cargo 300.¹ Although the term High Putinism can be justified, the extent to which 2012 represents a clean break from the Medvedev era (2008–2012) merits closer analysis than Trustrum-Thomas provides. The intense state control, increased censorship, and organised subjugation of dissidents that define this stage did not emerge from nothing but evolved through continuities obscured somewhat by the structure of the book.

Trustrum-Thomas situates his study in opposition to scholarship that favours either institutional politics or highly visible protest art. However, the argument of addressing a “gap” in the historiography of Russian culture exaggerates the novelty of this method. Though Lena Jonson (2016), Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky (2009), and Claire Bishop (2012) have already explored other facets of the Putin-era culture, recent work by Molly Flynn (2020), Lucie Kempf (2020),

1 *Cargo 300* is a durational performance project presented in multiple site-specific iterations, structured in three parts, carried out by three regular members, and addressing state violence and power relations through documentary material and participatory action.

and contributors to the edited volume by J. A. E. Curtis (2020) have already begun mapping marginal theatrical activities. The contribution of Trustrum-Thomas is less on the creation of uncharted territory than a theoretically ambitious synthesis. It has not been proven whether this synthesis can entirely explain theatrical activity beyond Moscow.

The question of marginality (both geographic and structural) frames the entire study but requires more rigorous theorization. The geographic restriction of the monograph poses a methodological problem, which Trustrum-Thomas acknowledges but addresses inadequately. Such a pragmatic justification of the focus on Moscow is appropriate; the city is home to festivals and a sort of national clearinghouse for regional theatre, but this argument conflates visibility with representativeness. The contents of his dissertation are even more narrow-minded than the published monograph, with the author admitting that “all of my research trips combined were not exhaustive of the capital’s theatre scene, especially given my desire to seek out the peripheral, underground theatre that had considerably less public visibility and was harder to find” (29). When the period of three years spent intensively in the field in Moscow was claimed not to be exhaustive, how can the resultant analysis be used to support a marginal theatre response to High Putinism in the country? The book indicates the region’s diversity by saying that plays and playwrights are proudly from the various cities of Russia; however, productions that pass through Moscow festivals have already been approved by the gatekeepers of the metropolis, hardly indicative of truly marginal practices.

The book’s lack of substantive treatment of these differences raises questions about whether its core arguments can be extrapolated beyond the metropolitan context. Even the marginality thesis should be interrogated. Trustrum-Thomas

describes margins, not geographically but structurally, as independent spaces operating on the fringes and in small venues (26). However, this structural definition exists in constant tension with the geographic concentration in Moscow, in which even peripheral spaces are located closer to cultural capital, international networks, and a certain relative ability to interfere with provincial conservative forces. An entirely marginal theatre in Novosibirsk or Vladivostok has rather different constraints than even Teatr.doc.

The author mentions the threat of being over-identified, yet fails to consider how collaborative relations such as providing translation work, surtitles, or radio-play adaptations may undermine his analytical distance. Once an academic becomes a co-creator, the critical distance required for rigorous evaluation inevitably shrinks. Trustrum-Thomas reflects on his methodological transparency as he shifts from observer to participant and, at times, to co-creator. Although reflexivity is a good ethnographic practice, the book underexplores the implications of such embeddedness.

The fieldwork period (2017–2019) coincided with the state’s increasing pressure on artists. Key informants were navigating existential professional threats, but the book remains largely silent on how such precarity might have influenced testimony, and whether the author’s position as a sympathetic western academic aligned with opposition and independent theatre communities may have encouraged certain voices to emphasize narratives of resistance and marginality. Moreover, the methodology used in the selection, namely the intentional choice of theatres that dealt with the heritage of New Drama and the preference for marginal practices (independent, non-state-funded venues operating outside institutional structures) raises the possibility of confirmation bias. After choosing practices characterized by marginality, Trustrum-Thomas unsurprisingly discovers that

marginal theatre is important. This circular reasoning raises the debate on whether the significance of these specific theatres is representative or exceptional.

Chapter 1's analysis of the documentary theatre is based on Teatr.doc and the development of the "zero position"² to the "witness theatre"³. Trustrum-Thomas perceives a paradigm shift, calling for ethical responsibility and subjectivity situated against objective detachment. This restructuring of spectatorship is closely linked to the play *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* by Elena Gremina and Mikhail Ugarov, a fictionalized reconstruction of the torture and death of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who exposed a large-scale tax fraud scheme involving Russian officials, in police custody. The play begins in the mode of spectatorship predisposed to moral interest and turns the audience into co-producers of meaning.

Although this chapter is a well-constructed expansion of Flynn's *Witness Onstage* (2020), the book overly relies on Flynn's periodization and theoretical approach without substantively testing her conclusions. Flynn herself notes that practices of zero position continued alongside witness theatre, a fact Trustrum-Thomas acknowledges but does not quite incorporate into his argument about the shift from zero position to witness theatre as a defining transformation in Russian documentary theatre practice. The book labels the shift as more conclusive than it deserves, since directors, such as Anastasiia Patlai, are still operating within the zero-position tradition. Worse still, the watershed moment impression of *One Hour*

Eighteen Minutes is exaggerated in the analysis of the work. Trustrum-Thomas admits that the mixture of truth and fiction presented in the play is in keeping with the so-called "theatre of the real" (31) introduced by Carol Martin (2013) and the tendencies in the contemporary world in socially oriented performance, but he fails to clarify what is unique about the Russian case in the presence of its specific political background.

The discussion of ethics of documentaries is underdeveloped in the book, though the reasons for this stage of scholarly inquiry remain underexplored in contemporary performance studies more broadly. Trustrum-Thomas observes that witness theatre raises partially unresolved questions about how one can continue to critically engage in an ever more constraining political space without losing its effectiveness, though these questions are not rigorously addressed. How do theatre-makers navigate the tension between activist urgency and aesthetic complexity? When does witness theatre risk instrumentalizing trauma? The book points in the direction of such issues but fails to offer any sustained analysis, leaving the reader with a generalised account of ethical confrontation and alternative articulation that needs to be grounded in a more concrete understanding.

Furthermore, in its analysis of actionist theatre in Chapter 4 the book is most provocative (153–157). This is particularly the case with the piece *Cargo 300* (an immersive performance about torture and state violence that used a Telegram chatbot to guide participants through Moscow's cityscape while assigning morally fraught tasks) by Katrin Nenasheva. Trustrum-Thomas articulates the notion of the body as, according to Foucault, a biopolitical reality configured by juridical, economic, and symbolic power effects, using Foucauldian ideas to investigate the unveiled system of violence through physical suffering (153). The discussion

- 2 Zero position is, according to Trustrum-Thomas, "a neutral, non-judgemental stance—promoted by Teatr.doc for the first eight years of its existence" (36).
- 3 "Witness theatre is a variety of documentary theatre. It presupposes that on the stage there are the actual people who were witnesses to the event in question. They could be actors or non-actors" (36).

of *Cargo 300*'s Telegram chatbot, spatial navigation across Moscow, and tasks that require significant moral judgment effectively shows how participants are oriented within reflected frameworks of command and surveillance.

Nonetheless, there are instances in which the theoretical apparatus intrudes upon the particularity of the performances. The conceptual scaffolding of the invocation of Kristeva's abject, Turner's rituals, and Rancière's dissensus at times function as theoretical citation in place for close reading. Trustrum-Thomas's claim that the Mutt game segment⁴ reveals the comfort with which power relations are reproduced remains abstract (163). What exactly happened? What was the response of the participants? The book could have been described with a bit more detail, with a bit less emphasis put on a theoretical framework, especially since such performances are ephemeral and no videos were taken.

The argument that actionist theatre is changing the audience into so-called active participants rather than spectators raises questions about agency and approval. Trustrum-Thomas does not consider discomfort or ambivalence to be contradictory to political efficacy, but he claims that it is precisely the discomfort these works caused that made them politically potent. However, this formulation risks romanticising coercion. In *Cargo 300* practice, when subjects feel refused, hesitant, or disgusted, is this empowerment or manipulation? The book fails to fully address these critiques of immersive theatre, which ask whether the manufactured discomfort is created as part of building actual political awareness or whether it is merely simulated.

Chapter 3's examination of gender and sexuality performances under

High Putinism looks at the outcomes of the 2013 "propaganda" law on the LGBTQ+ representations. Trustrum-Thomas discusses *Philosophers, or, The Great Orgy* by Valerii Pecheikin as one that undermines strict dichotomies and favours queer subjectivity that does not fit into categories. These are presented as an outcry against the ideology of the state of patriarchy and the Russian Orthodox Church. But the analysis is chiefly descriptive, listing the resistant gestures and not analysing them in terms of efficacy and restriction. To say that these works serve as temporary utopian spaces is to concede their limited influence while raising their symbolic value. However, the permanent utopia that vanishes at the end can instead support rather than confront established authority systems by harnessing opposition in the aesthetic field.

The play *28 Days* by Olga Shiliaeva is presented as a challenge to the menstruation as taboo perspective through feminine aesthetics. Trustrum-Thomas places this in the tradition of taboo-breaking associated with New Drama and reads it as revealing the boundaries of feminist discourse that High Putinism has. This recognition should be further developed. What are these limits? In what ways is the play treating them? The book lists the resistant material without sufficiently evaluating the validity of taboo-breaking in a situation in which the state has suppressed the oppositional culture by marginalising it and imposing economic constraints.

Chapter 4 addresses Pussy Riot within the broader context of actionist theatre, examining how their interventions relate to the work of other performance collectives like *Cargo 300*. The book's discussion of Pussy Riot extends beyond their 2012 performance of *A Punk Prayer* in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, which protested the Russian Orthodox Church's support for Putin and resulted in the imprisonment of members Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and

4 The Mutt (Shavka) game was the second, interactive segment of *Cargo 300*; during a public-space iteration several months after the February 2019 premiere, attended by the author, it was cut short due to an impending police intervention.

Maria Alekhina. It also encompasses their subsequent activist interventions. Here, Trustrum-Thomas's closeness to his subjects is most visible (149–151). These interventions are celebrated as joyful acts of resistance, yet there is a critical lack of distance in the analysis. The global visibility of Pussy Riot across the world and their integration into Western activist networks and institutions are important for distinguishing them from a collectivity of truly marginal actors, but the book fails to theorise this difference properly. The marginality paradigm is put in an awkward position, trying to be applied to figures who, despite their persecution in their home country, develop significant cultural capital abroad.

A comparison between the published monograph and Trustrum-Thomas's earlier dissertation reveals additional conflicts in his argument. It is worth acknowledging that the thesis of violence, as the framework used by Beumers and Lipovetsky (2009), still applies to works discussed in the book, such as Dmitrii Danilov's play *The Man from Podolsk*. Yet this continuity is understated in favour of emphasizing novelty and rupture. The dissertation's analysis of *The Man from Podolsk* as representing Socialist Realist tropes (the path to consciousness, the new Soviet man, re-education through psychological violence) points to the idea that the cultural politics of High Putinism involve as much rehabilitation of Soviet structures as the imposition of new conservative-authoritarian forms. The book would benefit from a more explicit theorization of this interplay between continuity and discontinuity.

The last chapter discusses the aftermath of the pandemic and the 2022 invasion, recording the effects of the so-called brain drain, institutional shutdowns, and what the author calls the dismantling of infrastructure, bringing an end to an era of experimentation in theatres. The evaluation is rightly sobering, as it has pointed out that twenty years

of creativity have been essentially wiped out (196–204). However, at the end of the book, the survival practices and moral commitments are found to offer cautious hope, and these may eventually bring about renewal in a post-war, post-Putin society. This is indicative of redemptive futurity, but this act, though comprehensible, does not go well with the prior recordings of comprehensive destruction. The transition between elegy and hope seems to be made as a necessity and not as an earned accomplishment, bound by the scholastic traditions dictating that one must end positively.

Irrespective of such limitations, *Russian Theatre at the Margins of High Putinism* is a significant contribution to theatre studies and Slavic cultural history. Trustrum-Thomas documents the precious implementation of practices that have substantially disappeared and forms an archive of performances that would otherwise be lost. The theoretical aspiration of the book, namely the synthesis of performance studies, art history, and political theory, definitely yields enlightening insights, especially in the reading of actionist theatre and the body as the location of political inscription.

Nevertheless, the assertions would be more convincing if the study was more detached from the subjects and if there were greater focus on regional differences outside of Moscow, as well as an exhaustive examination of the counterargument. The model of marginality, though productive, needs to be theorised more rigorously in terms of explaining the considerable differences between fringe practices in the metropolis and the peripheral theatrical activity. The presupposition of resisting and alternative articulation, although not entirely baseless, occasionally obscures the extent to which even opposition culture was limited by the power structures it sought to oppose.

In conclusion, Alex Trustrum-Thomas shows that marginal theatre

in High Putinism created the space of ethical challenge and dissent discourse that interferes with unitary accounts of Russian society. The question of whether these practices amounted to meaningful resistance or only simulated it, whether temporary autonomous zones within authoritarian structures actually threaten them or stabilise them by holding dissent within their own systems, is open and not necessarily competently answered in the book. This irresolution can be the most truthful evaluation available: theatre in totalitarianism is conducted in uncertain terms, with an effect that is difficult to define or categorise as complicit or oppositional, impotent or transformative.

MgA. Hossein Oroumiehchiha
Univerzita Karlova
Filozofická fakulta
Katedra divadelní vědy
oroumieh@ff.cuni.cz
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8287-4224>

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