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Derevo: Absolute clowns

ARCHIVE Daily Telegraph, 16 January 2001: Russian clown troupe Derevo have been likened to a cult. Ismene Brown met founder Anton Adassinski

by [Ismene Brown](#) | Tuesday, 16 January 2001

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Clown troupe Derevo: "people who have so many characters and performances inside them, that they hardly know who they are"

Clowns are supposed to be chubby, grinning, funny, with anarchic hair and big red noses, like Coco. Or they are Chaplin-types, oppressed little city folk mutely combating the vast machines of the working life. They are not generally shaven-headed skinny men and women with beaky noses, starved cheekbones, and a way of life so severely monastic that it would drive you or me stark staring mad.

But then Derevo are not ordinary clowns. If you have seen either of this Russian company's two productions that have visited London and Edinburgh in recent years you will know this. *The Red Zone* was an apocalyptic vision of what one critic called "the circus at the end of the world", while - by complete contrast - *Once* was the most charming, poignant love story. I found both extraordinary experiences; a crazy-paving of incidents, music, mime, acrobatics, clowning - often hilarious,

“Some people say you can't learn to be a clown, you have to be born one. I don't believe that. I was born a normal man

”

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often captivatingly lyrical, but often puzzling, obscure, even horrible.

Both productions have garnered them awards worldwide, and next week Derevo headlines the always attractive London International Mime Festival with *The Rider*, a three-hander for the group's founding members, Anton Adassinski, Elena Yarovaya and Tatiana Khabarova. It was inspired, says Adassinski, by the life of the itinerant actor - "people who have so many characters and performances inside them, that they hardly know any more who they are. And if you ask them to talk about their life, they will jump from one imaginary character to another. That is their reality."

Derevo's reality has a similar ephemerality. It pulls its productions together with minimal physical resources - just three or four people and a mass of homemade props, battered musical instruments and bits of converted litter - but, concomitantly, a great deal of the resources all artists covet above all: time and almost masochistic dedication.

The personnel selected themselves 12 years ago by voluntarily undergoing eight months of gruelling physical and mental tests - immobility, freezing cold, isolation, among them - in order to scrape away their intellectual habits and become performers driven - as purely as possible by instinct and spirit. It's so weird and absolutist that some accuse Derevo of being a little cult, revolving round their charismatic leader Anton Adassinski, now 41.

Choosing one's face is crucial to a clown, and the cadaverous Adassinski has created a minimalist but bizarre image for himself, resembling less a man than a sort of gigantic, mangy, plucked bird, a character both hopeful and hopeless at the same time.

But he didn't appear particularly odd when I met him at the company's headquarters in Dresden recently. In contrast to the silent, solemn way the performers work together, he was talkative, sociable, fond of rock music and Brazilian samba. He told me that what keeps his little band together on its stony artistic road is shared goals, and "they like me and I like them." Besides, it isn't so stony - Derevo has been dogged by success ever since he established it in Leningrad in 1988.

That's why they keep moving from city to city, from Leningrad to Prague, then Amsterdam, Florence and now Dresden, showered with hospitality and civic honour and international requests for workshops for adoring acolytes, which Adassinski finds a bit of a pain. "Whenever we become a normal event in a city we have to move on," he says. He likes Dresden because, after four years' residence, "some people still don't know we're here. I find that fantastic, I love it."

Though Adassinski first made his name as the stage partner of the renowned clown Slava Polunin - of *Snowshow* and Cirque du Soleil fame - he has darker instincts, more underground. Yet not political, despite the company's origins - politics, he tells me firmly, are transient, his interest is in the more permanent elements of experience.

Love, for instance, as in *Once*. Death, for instance. "The Russians call Death 'she'. 'She' lives with you. When you start to think about death, read books about her, act about her, she gives you a lot of energy, frees you in a sense.

"I saw a lot of death when I went travelling as a young man around Russia, many poor people in terrible situations. It was bad. Finally I did a very simple thing. Let's say someone asks you, what have you done today? You have to say that you've done something. Especially in art."

Adassinski grew up rebellious in Leningrad, raised in a controlled country where even theatre training had only one right way, and the history of the Communist party was an essential ingredient. The individualism of street theatre and travelling players was banned. He was expelled from three schools, became a hippy and went on the road to discover the world of the USSR; he played rock guitar, took up photography, but aimlessly - until he went to see Slava Polunin, Russia's one and only theatrical clown (as opposed to circus clowns).

He became Polunin's student, and then his partner, before Polunin told him they were heading in different directions. "For me, he is the great lyric clown, still the great teacher," says Adassinski with affection. "Whatever people say about *Snowshow*, that it has gone on too long, that he should do something new, what Slava has done for Russia is great. He brought back clowns to Russia. He brought back an old art."

Polunin's clowning touched everyone; even the "bad men", even President Brezhnev liked him, says Adassinski. The younger man sought something darker, fiercer, more like Japanese Butoh. But it was Polunin who taught Adassinski that to find honesty on stage was a serious, time-consuming quest.

Derevo's cast work together up to 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week, delving up their material, often in intense, hermit-like silence. The shaved heads prevent vanity and enable instant changes of appearance.

I wondered how on earth they could stand being together so all-consumingly. "We must speak as little as possible to each other in real life. When we do, we use very careful words. We are always playing characters, a little bit, with each other. Eight



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hours a day together, you can go crazy otherwise.”

Do they have long-suffering families waiting somewhere with dinner in the oven?
“I’m sorry, but we don’t answer such questions.”

As it happens, I heard through conversation elsewhere that Adassinski lives with Khabarova, and Yarovaya on her own; but another performer is married and has children, so being in Derevo clearly doesn’t forbid a natural life.

What qualities make a good clown? Come to that, what is a clown? “Some people say you can’t learn to be a clown, you have to be born one. I don’t believe that. I was born a normal man, I just learned it from Slava, and proved it for myself. If you work very hard in any direction, you have a result.

“But what is a clown? It’s not my words, but I will say what they say in Russia. There is one string between universal chaos and our planet, a string that is laughter. When you laugh, you connect yourself again with chaos. Which is why when we find something funny the body suddenly moves in this uncontrollable way. The clown is the person who can pull the string and turn the universe upside down and show people there is another way to live, another magic reality.”

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