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Keep calm, the corridor will be open soon
Soso Daughters, representation of trauma and independent creative practice in contemporary Russian theatre

OLGA NIKOLAEVA

ABSTRACT
This article explores the creative practice of an independent Russian theatre collective, Soso Daughters. The collective was founded in Moscow by theatre director and playwright Zhenya Berkovich in 2018 and recently premiered their fourth production. The subjects of the productions the collective performs often delve into girls' and women's lives and traumatic experiences that are constantly undermined, dismissed or ignored. Driven by the feminist ethic of care, this article aims to situate Soso Daughters' creative work in the context of scan-aesthetic across the Nordic and Baltic regions, and to turn scholars and spectators' attention to the issue of an independent theatre practice in Russia. The article is based on interviews with the collective's director and scenographer as well as first-hand observations of their productions. The article further explores the possibility of representation of trauma and traumatic experience in *The Rhyme*, the collective's first production, grounding the analysis in that the holistic approach to scenography.

KEYWORDS
Soso Daughters, Russia, independent theatre, scenography, feminist ethic of care, trauma, *The Rhyme*

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Introduction

In 2018, a group of researchers conducted a quantitative study of all theatres in the Russian Federation.[1] In the research objectives, the authors of the study emphasized a significant influence that a fast-growing number of independent or non-state theatres have on the Russian cultural landscape. Coming under different terms, an independent, non-state or private theatre, in the authors' definition, is a theatre that does not have permanent financial support from the state.[2] The same year, *Teatr.*, one of Russia's oldest theatre magazines, released a special issue "Geography of Independency", where the subject of independent theatres or, as they are also referred to, independent theatre initiatives, and their histories across Russia was given central focus.[3] The issue emphasizes that, for instance, St. Petersburg leads in the number of independent theatres, not only in present times but also historically. In the meantime, Moscow trails behind even the most remote regions when it comes to the number of independent theatre initiatives.

Unlike many independent theatres, theatre collectives do not only lack the state's financial support but also do not have a permanent platform. While the independent theatre collectives are even harder to pinpoint than independent theatres, their contribution to the overall theatre landscape of the country should not be underestimated and needs to be thoroughly researched. Taking all the above into consideration, this article highlights and explores the practice of one of the existing independent theatre collectives that has been working and performing in Moscow and across Russia during the past few years – Soso Daughters.[4]

The lack of comprehensive studies done on independent theatre collectives

[1] Ivanov et al. 2018.
[2] Ivanov et al. 2018.
[3] See: Teatr., n.35 http://oteatre.info/issues/2018-35/
[4] More examples of independent theatres: *Nevidimiy Teater* lead by Semion Serzin; *Teatr post* lead by Dmitriy Volkostrelov; *Teatr Di Kapya* lead by Ilona Makarova.

in post-Soviet Russia makes it close to impossible to create a clear genealogy and place one specific collective in its context. They frequently fall between non-state theatres, as defined above, and *the theatre of enterprise*, a commerce-based theatre that is founded on the collaboration between an investor and well-known practitioners from the state theatres. Furthermore, as the financial support for independent collectives is very limited, many of its practitioners are employed part-time at other places, which makes the definition of what exactly an independent theatre collective is and how to trace them rather complicated. However, their number and variety are undoubtedly growing and require careful attention for a full understanding of the contemporary theatre landscape in Russia.

A few aspects gave rise to the theatre collectives. For one, the emergence of different commercial platforms that provide these types of initiatives with performance spaces.[5] This allows independent projects to function on small budgets without having to pay a fixed rent. Furthermore, festivals of young dramaturgy and new drama, such as Lubimovka and Novya Drama that have firmly established themselves in Russia since the 1990s, provide a significant amount of textual material. While this material might not be of interest for the repertoire or commercially oriented theatres, it provides independent theatres and collectives alike with a significant number of interesting plays and texts. Additionally, a system of grants that has been developing in Russia for the past decade played a considerable, though sometimes exclusive, role in the development of independent theatre collectives.[6] Alongside all these factors, a genuine interest of young theatre practitioners to develop and grow outside of the state theatres makes a big impact on the progress of new independent initiatives across the country.

When something is defined as independent in Russia, it is immediately set in a complex net of political, social, economic, and cultural relations, uncovering significant contradictions and problems. For instance, it exposes the existing clash between stationary repertoire drama theatres, with their traditions deeply rooted in Russian psychological theatre, and contemporary theatre that developed under a strong influence of "western theatre and postmodernist cultural discourse."[7] Both types of theatre are equally criticized and prized by theatre practitioners, scholars, theatre critiques, and audiences alike. On the one hand, traditions still hold great value in Russian culture. On the other hand, new theatres of experimentation speak to different categories of spectators, keeping the theatre art on its toes. Both aspects are simultaneously positive and negative, creating the constant negation of old traditions and new developments, without which it is impossible to imagine Russian society at large.

The idea of independency in theatre practice is primarily connected to the freedom of choice in how an independent theatre collective navigates the aesthetic, stylistic, and thematic ground of their creative practice. It is important to emphasize that members of independent theatrical collectives usually have

[5] For example: *Boyarskiye Palaty* and *Meyerhold Center* in Moscow or *Tsekh* in St. Petersburg.
[6] For example, STDRF grants. See: http://stdrf.ru/tvorcheskie-proekty/vozmozhnosti/granty/
[7] Vislova 2010, 29. All translations from Russian are by the author.

a professional theatre education, which allows them a point of departure and reference in which they can rely on their knowledge of what has been done before and what can be done differently. Looking specifically into the creative practice of Soso Daughters, I suggest that what connects independent theatre collectives across the Nordic countries and the Baltic region, including Russia, is the initial ability of arts, in words of theatre scholar Miriam Haughton, to "contribute to the creation of cultural, phenomenological, and psychological spaces" and create encounter with "narratives not yet officially welcomed in the public sphere."[8] An independent theatre practice is a platform for alternatives and experiments, which is, in varying degrees, relevant to the different countries covered by the umbrella term scan-aesthetic. It is a theatre of experiments, the one that functions outside of the frame of expectations that has been established through centuries in theatre as an institution. That is why, instead of simply writing Soso Daughters into the frame of Russian contemporary theatre, I wish to emphasize the elements of their practice, which connects the collective's work to the expanded geography of independent theatres across the world. This paper argues that through their ongoing work, they can create a universal language of representation, especially when it comes to the representation of trauma, that stretches across regions, language groups, and cultures, constantly expanding the limits of representation and dislodging hierarchies that are still prevalent in cultural institutions, theatre included.

The unprecedented situation in which all countries find themselves in during the ongoing pandemic also gives a fresh perspective on how, geographically and historically, remote independent theatres and collectives are going through the same struggles.[9] The arts in general and theatres in particular, are brought together by their somewhat ephemeral and fragile state, which has nothing to do with the quality of the theatres' work but rather with their place among competitors and in history. Thus, it is valuable to investigate the works of independent theatre collectives as they are used to unstable situations, are not bound economically to a specific platform, and would have to rely on their own resilience even during the best of times.

Soso Daughters: independent practice and thematic framework

Soso Daughters[10] came together as an independent theatre collective under the leadership of director and playwright Zhenya Berkovich in October 2018 when they took part in the children and young adults' theatre section of "Golden Mask", the most renowned Russian theatre competition and award. As Berkovich jokingly explained in one of the interviews, they had to come up with a name for the collective on the spot. They had two options, "VIA Libido" and "Soso Daughters". They quickly decided that the first option was too much for the children and young adults' section and took up the name Soso Daughters, which did not make much sense either, as Berkovich admitted.[11]

[8] Haughton 2018, 120.
[9] Kuzmina 2020.
[10] rus. Дочери СОСО.
[11] Polikhovich 2020.

While there is a general lack of comprehensive study on independent theatre collectives, Soso Daughters are also special because they are led by a female director and employ an all-women cast. As Berkovich explained in the interview, they do not consider themselves an all-women's collective because their producer and collaborators, such as composers, stage crew, sound, and light technicians, are not exclusively women.[12] As Berkovich described, it was her personal desire to work with someone she felt comfortable with when the collective first came together, as it caught her on a professional crossroads when she considered leaving theatre for good. She explained that she wanted to stage rather than to push an extra mile, to prove herself to be worthy of a director's place, and for that working with women, some of whom were friends, was essential.[13]

The pressure and certain sense of *proving oneself* is not unique in Berkovich's situation. It is still particularly rare to have a female director as head of an independent theatre collective or, for that matter, any theatre in Russia. The historical view of a woman's role in the context of Russian theatre, aside from their roles as actresses, was defined as "supportive" at best. One of the main directors of independent theatre Teatr.doc[14]*,* Anastasia Patlay, underlines, that women in theatre often take a secondary place next to that of male directors.[15] While *he* creates worlds, *she* serves these worlds, taking care of what is done but not creating something herself. With very few exceptions, work published on contemporary Russian theatre ignores the existing bias, adding significantly to the gap.[16]

Entrenched stereotypical ideas that are based on the understanding of the creation of theatre as essentially a male endeavour, discourages women from entering the profession already on an educational level. The Russian language even has a common saying, which specifically degrades the position of women directors by mockingly comparing them to a hen: "kuritsa ne ptitca, zhenshchina/baba ne rezhisser" ("a hen is not a bird; a woman is not a director")[17]. It is a general derogatory saying that can be used in different contexts to degrade women's work and its quality. It is often used in relation to women directors in theatre and film.[18] However, in her interview, Berkovich underlined that the independent theatre is a good platform for paradigmatic change when it comes to female directors. And while it is still hard for women to become heads of independent theatres or theatre collectives, it is still more possible than in repertoire state theatres.[19]

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12 Nikolaeva 03.09.2021

13 Nikolaeva 03.09.2021

14 rus. Театр.doc

15 Nikolaeva 2017.

16 As an exception, see: Marina Raikina, *Galina Volchek: Kak pravilo vne pravil*, Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, Moskva, 2019.

17 rus. Курица – не птица, женщина/баба – не режиссер.

18 See: Kisilev 2018.

19 Nikolaeva 03.09.2021.

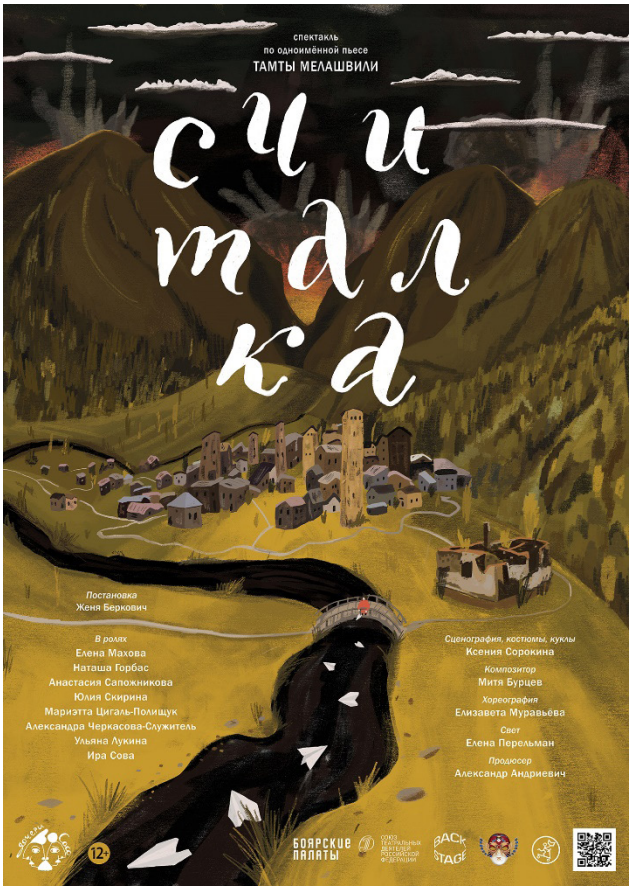

Figure 1. Official poster of The Rhyme, 2018, designed by Polya Plavinskaya, courtesy Soso Daughters.

At the time this article was written, the collective had staged four productions. Their first work, *The Rhyme20*, with which Soso Daughters participated in "Golden Mask," is based on the short novel written by Georgian writer and women's rights activist, Tamta Melaschvili (b.1979) (see Figure 1). It unravels around the lives of two girls trapped in a small village during the Abkhazian war. It was created in three weeks of rehearsal time, with a meagre budget of approximately 340 euros, and no designated rehearsal space.[21] The production was selected for the long list for the award for 2018/2019.

Their second production, a so-called sketch performance, *Meteo-chertik22*, revolves around a small graphic book by Gulag prisoner, Olga Ranitskay, which she created during her imprisonment in the 1940s.[23] The book consists of drawings of a character, *chertik*, accompanied by short rhymes that describe the hero's adventures. It gives almost no context to Olga's life in the work camp but functions as her connection to the outside world. The production was a part of a theatre laboratory and was performed on the platform of the Gulag Museum. This work stayed in the form of a sketch and, so far, has not been

20 rus. *Считалка.*
21 Isupova, 2019.
22 rus. *Метео-чертик.*
23 See: GULAG History Museum https://gmig.ru/projects/izdatelskaya-programma/Meteochertik/

repeated by the collective.

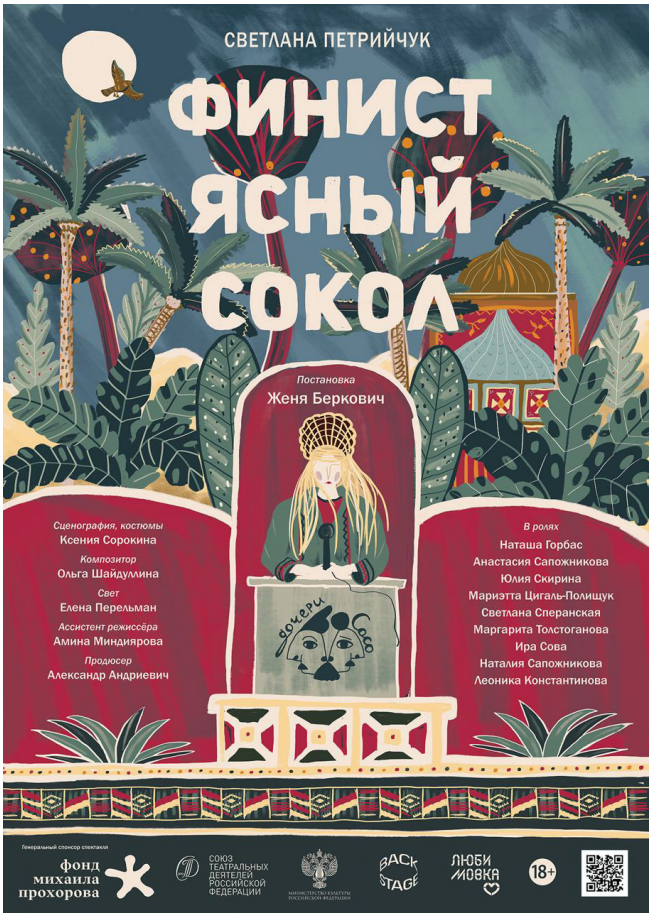

Figure 2. Official poster for Finist the Bright Falcon, 2019, designed by Polya Plavinskaya, courtesy Soso Daughters.

The third work, *Finist the Bright Falcon*[24], premiered on 30 January 2021, after it was postponed several times due to COVID-19. The name of this production is based on an old Russian folklore tale and the idea is derived from the play written by Russian playwright Svetlana Petriichuk (b.1980) (see Figure 2). In her play, Petriichuk creates semi-documentary, semi-fictional scenes of the prosecution of a young woman who got married to a radical Islamist over the Internet and was caught on her way to meet her husband. She is prosecuted under article 208 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, which implies a fixed term of imprisonment for creating or partaking in an illegal armed group. The production is loosely based on Petriichuk's text, adding a range of monologues and dialogues as an attempt to present in-depth stories of different women who found themselves in the same circumstances. The women all become one and are named Maryschka[25], after the heroine of the original fairy-tale about the Finist, and their stories are presented as a grim retelling of Maryschka's trip to

[24] rus. *Финист Ясный Сокол.*
[25] rus. Марьюшка

a faraway land to meet her Finist the Bright Falcon.[26] Talking about the play in one of the interviews, Berkovich described it as a "half-opera", as something in-between "musical composition and post-dramatic theatre."[27]

The collective's latest production deviates significantly from their previous works. As Berkovich admitted, they were psychologically tired of working with heavy texts and wanted to stage something that would give them some sort of a break and, at the same time, allow them to continue to develop as a collective.[28] *The Rice Dog29* is a phantasmagory based on verses written by Feodor Swarovskiy. Playful and confusing at times, the production explores themes of love, friendship, life, and loss in a non-linear narrative.

Apart from their latest production, the themes of the collective's works deal essentially with a certain aspect of a young women's life and the circumstances they find themselves in, delving into something that is often impossible to represent – the traumatic experience of others. In her exploration of trauma, Haughton employs the concept of "shadowing" when she refers to narratives that are not completely silenced but "de-escalated in urgency, isolated from public points of discourse, and somehow associated with threat or danger," which makes individuals wary of them, as they are at "risk of becoming tainted by association."[30] Thus, I argue that in the ground of the collective's work lies a potential resistance to "shadowing" as they refer to narratives and subjects that are persistently ignored and silenced. Not only in a historical context but in the immediate, present-day reality in Russia. As Berkovich emphasized, they are interested in working with open texts that do not present a definite answer to complicated questions of one's experience.[31]

Creative practice: the feminist ethic of care and holistic scenography

To engage with Soso Daughters' work, I propose a two-pronged approach to the analysis. First, I place their creative practice into the context of a feminist activist position, grounding my approach in the feminist ethic of care, which acts as a conceptual framework for this paper. Second, I base my approach on the analysis of the scenography of their first stage production, *The Rhyme,* to situate the collective's creativity in the global context of theatre and performance studies. More specifically, I assess the scenography of the play from a holistic perspective, emphasizing the scenography's quality of place orientation and the active role of scenographic materials in the creation of affective and meaning-making processes.

The ethic of care can be summed up in the words of its pioneer, Carol Gilligan, as "the ongoing historical process of changing the voice of the world by bringing women's voices into the open, thus starting a new conversation."[32] Furthermore, Gilligan emphasizes that the ethic of care recasts "our discussion

[26] The text is available in Russian: https://lubimovka.ru/sbornik/781-petriichuk
[27] Krizhevskiy 2020.
[28] Nikolaeva 03.09.2021.
[29] rus. *Рисовая Собака.*
[30] Haughton 2018, 5.
[31] Nikolaeva 03.09.2021.
[32] Gilligan 2000, xxvii.

of relationship and the telling of truth."[33] Appropriation of the ethic of care is in this context something that takes it from the domain of interpersonal relations and applies it widely to the study at hand. The feminist ethic of care is what drives me, as a researcher, to study a rather new and small theatre collective in the context of the rich and vast landscape of Russian contemporary theatre. With this study, I wish to challenge the hidden gender discrimination in Russian theatre by purposefully analysing performances that are created in collaboration among women theatre practitioners. My study attempts to give a *voice* to their works in a global context and emphasizes their creative activity in the context of feminist activism, following Gilligan's point that "without voice, there is no possibility for resistance, for creativity."[34] This angle is particularly important in the context of the political climate in contemporary Russia, where any form of expression that does not fall in line with the official agenda can be considered dangerous and prosecuted by an ever-growing number of laws.[35]

Furthermore, the feminist ethic of care applies the idea of voice and women's experience specifically to Soso Daughters' creative practice, delving into the subject matter they explore in their productions. The staging of difficult subjects is seen as a moral obligation, where care for others' voices manifests itself in addressing small and hidden narratives that, nevertheless, affect how the histories of girls' and women's experiences are built. This creates a form of feminist activism, where women's voices, in this case theatre practitioners', bring the otherwise ignored or deemed insignificant experience of others forward. It creates a balance between the needs and responsibilities that Soso Daughters are engaging with in their works. As theatre scholar Kim Solga underlines, the staging of women's experiences "may allow the contradictions shaping those experiences to become visible."[36]

To explore Soso Daughters' creative practice and, especially, to examine how they render possible the representation of trauma and traumatic experience, I analyse the scenography of one of their ongoing productions – *The Rhyme*. Primarily, I address scenography as "a set of potentialities rather than a singular message"[37] and recognize it, in words of scenography scholar Rachel Hann as a "holistic strategy of theatre-making."[38] What I emphasize in this holistic strategy is the understanding of scenography as a practice of *place orientation*. Hann, from whom this approach originates, defines scenography of place orientation as a practice that "encompasses personal and social decisions" and, what is more important in the context of *The Rhyme*, it is a practice that conditions

[33] Gilligan 2000, xviii.
[34] Gilligan 2000, xix.
[35] For instance, an ongoing trial over the Russian artist, theatre director, and activist, Julia Tsvetkova, who is accused of breaking a so-called "gay propaganda" law for her LGBTQ rights activism and of trafficking of pornographic material over the Internet for her body positive drawings. She is now recognized as a political prisoner. See: https://memohrc.org/en/news_old/feminist-artist-yulia-tsvetkova-political-prisoner-memorial-says
[36] Solga 2016, 27.
[37] McKinney and Palmer 2017, 10.
[38] Hann 2019, 3.

"affects of physical environments that channel and direct action."[39] Following Hann's arguments, I too propose to recognize the scenography of the selected production as an interventional situation, which is capable of turning the place of performance into an affective space, in which meaning and perception is delivered both affectively and cognitively.[40] Thus, I propose to focus on the material aspects of scenography and emphasize the role of the relations between human and non-human materials in the construction of the affective environment of *The Rhyme*. Looking into the materialist aspect of scenography, I explore what Joslin McKinney referred to as "the expressivity and instability of theatre materials"[41] and how it contributes to the understanding of a complex scenographic rendering of trauma and traumatic experience. This will allow a close look at the role scenographic materials perform in the construction of the production's meaning alongside its verbal component.

Enki-benki-sikli-sa: The Rhyme as a potential sensing of trauma

The plot of *The Rhyme* unfolds around three days in the lives of two teenage girls, Knopa (Elena Makhova) and Ninzo (Natasha Gorbas), named after two Georgian saints, Ketevan and Nino, who are trapped in a small village by the ongoing Abkhazian war.[42] The girls and the rest of the village, mostly women, children, and old men, live their days in hopeless anticipation of the opening of the humanitarian corridor. The girls' coming of age unravels on a precarious border between the horrifying realities of war, where old people are like the living dead and the dead are not buried because they are not *ours*, and an unruly desire for normal teenage life, where girls sing along to popular music and tease each other about boys. At the centre of the story is the girls' decision to ransack an abundant pharmacy in a nearby village to save Knopa's starving baby-brother, which inevitably leads to Knopa's death on a minefield. The title of the production is based on the rhyme that Knopa cites before her death: *enki-benki-sikli-sa, enki-benki-da, the one who hesitates is gone forever43.*

The production was specifically staged for the architectural space of Boyarskiye Palaty[44], a quirky old place in the centre of Moscow that belongs to the Union of Theatre Workers of the Russian Federation. The Scenography of *The Rhyme* fully engages with the space's potential for the creation of a multisensory environment of "affective materials, atmospheres and

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39 Hann 2019, 19.

40 Hann 2019.

41 McKinney 2019, 69.

42 The Abkhazian war (1992-93) was fought between Georgian government forces and Abkhazian separatists, supported by Russian armed forces and North Caucasian forces. The war was the biggest conflict that happened after the collapse of the Soviet Union and is known for its atrocious large-scale ethnic cleansing and serious human rights violations that significantly affected the Georgian population in Abkhazia. For more information see: Conciliation Resources https://www.c-r.org/programme/caucasus/georgian-abkhaz-conflict-focus?gclid=CjwKCAjw_L6LBhBbEiwA4c46uq2Ouky4x4xKFm2jpPzwboqko2s4T7JIUbsusDJd5hrlioNoGD0XfBoCv7sQAvD_BwE

43 rus. "Энки-бенки-сикли-са, энки-бенки-да, кто замешкался, ушел навсегда".

44 rus. Боярские Палаты.

orientations."[45] As a theatre location, Boyarskiye Palaty is relatively new and does not have a stage in the traditional understanding of the theatre space, with the stage and audience space being separated from each other. Instead, it is a rhythmic structure of low-ceiling enfilade chambers and a long-arched corridor that runs alongside these chambers. The original red brick masonry and lack of windows create a feeling of isolation from the bustling centre of Moscow. This complex environment is neatly intertwined with the structure of the production, as the spectators are invited to take their place in different rooms throughout the presentation. The different rooms of Boyarskiye Palaty can act both as lived spaces, where an act is unfolding and as voids on the back of the spectators' vision.

In the first room, the spectators encounter the table around which the actresses sit and chat while sewing a ragdoll with the tape of a cassette instead of thread. They talk, laugh, and sing along to a popular song while a projection on the curtain behind their backs shows traditional Georgian food. The composition, idyllic at first, is quickly broken as one sees flies crawling over the food and looks closely at the limp body of the doll on the table. Two smartly dressed young women, soldiers, as it becomes apparent later, circle around the table and the audience with mean smirks on their faces, creating a tense feeling. The same soldiers usher the spectators into the second nominal space, where the main part of the play unravels, and at the end, they are the ones who announce that "*the corridor is open*" and command people to move further. As Hann remarks, both material and immaterial elements "orientate a feeling of place."[46] Physical bodies as well as the sound of their voices, or even facial expressions, all tune the spectators' perception and feeling of the place and the action.

A person, as Berkovich explains, needs to physically experience this short pathway between being a mere visitor in the theatre foyer to becoming a part of the scary space of war to gradually enter, as Berkovich remarks, "the conventionality of this play, dollish, raggish, poor."[47] Throughout the experience of passage, confusion, and unusual closeness to the world of the production, the scenography of orientation gradually becomes, in Hann's words, "a scenography of feeling."[48] Even when the spectators are seated, they continue to travel by means of different elements of scenographic ecology that sustains the atmosphere of the place, turning it into *some-place-else*. The sounds of water in the canyon, where the girls go to see a dead man, or the sound of the grass on the minefield, which Knopa tries to cross in the end, they are all imitated by the voices of the actresses. They support "the happening of an atmosphere,"[49] which sustains the affective qualities of the play's scenography. Scenographer Pamela Howard suggests that sound can be considered as "a visual element", possessing the ability to "create a soundscape that can give

[45] Hann 2019, 20.
[46] Hann 2019, 21.
[47] Isupova, 2019.
[48] Hann 2019, 19.
[49] Hann 2019, 20.

the spectators contextual information" even if it is not presented visually.[50] It is both a soundscape of place and a soundscape of time when the heroines sing popular 90s songs in a complex a cappella choir.

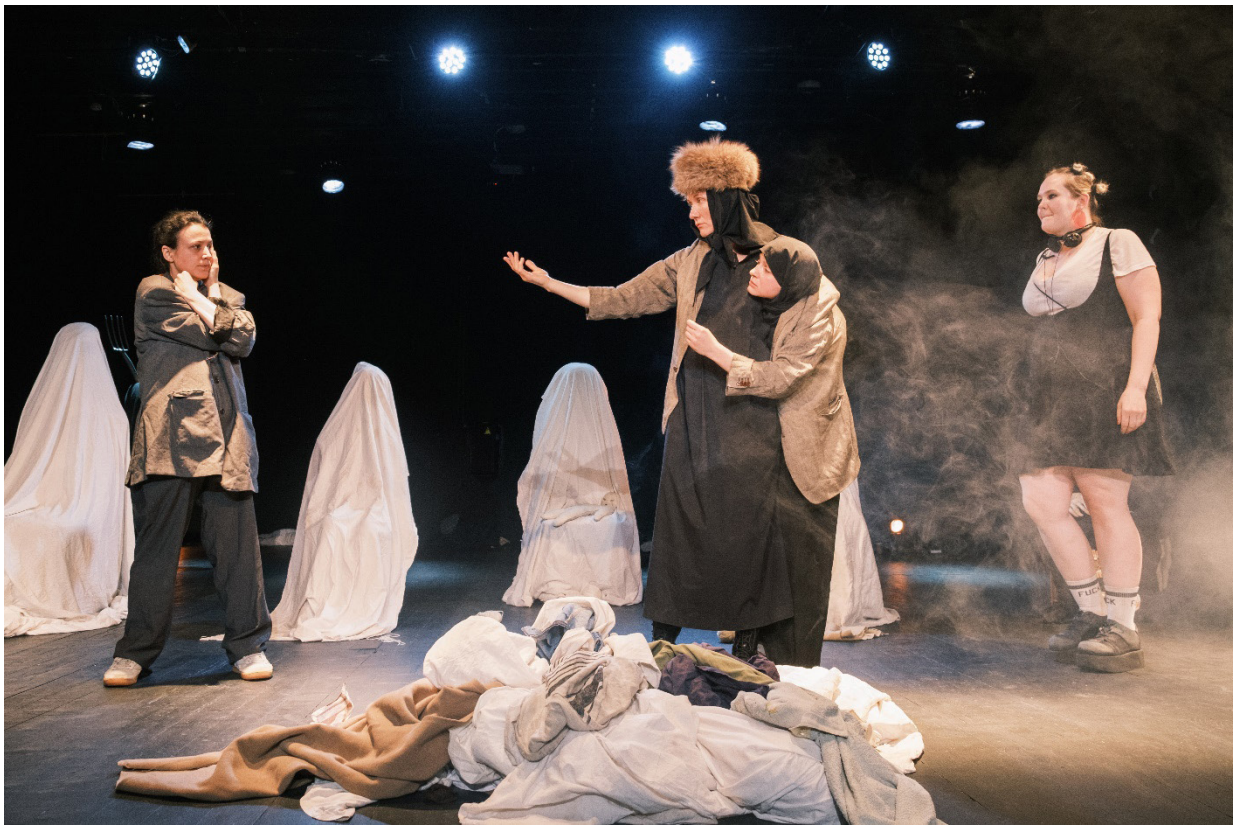

Figure 3. The scene in which Knopa (Elena Makhova) and Ninzo (Natasha Gorbas) encounter women from the village, 2018, photographer Dmitriy Veselov, courtesy Soso Daughters.

When the spectators are moved to the second space, they are greeted by sitting figures whose anthropomorphic shapes are barely recognizable under the white covers (see Figure 3). The human-size ragdolls that were, together with costumes and other props, created by the collective's scenographer, Ksenia Sorokina, play one of the most significant roles in the material aspects of the production's scenography. As Sorokina explained, in the beginning the dolls were only meant to represent men in the village, those that are gone and old men who stayed behind to mourn the loss of their sons.[51] But later, they start to represent almost everybody else in the village, apart from the main heroines and few people they encounter actively in their adventure.

[50] Howard in Haughton 2018, 141.
[51] Nikolaeva 15.01.2021.

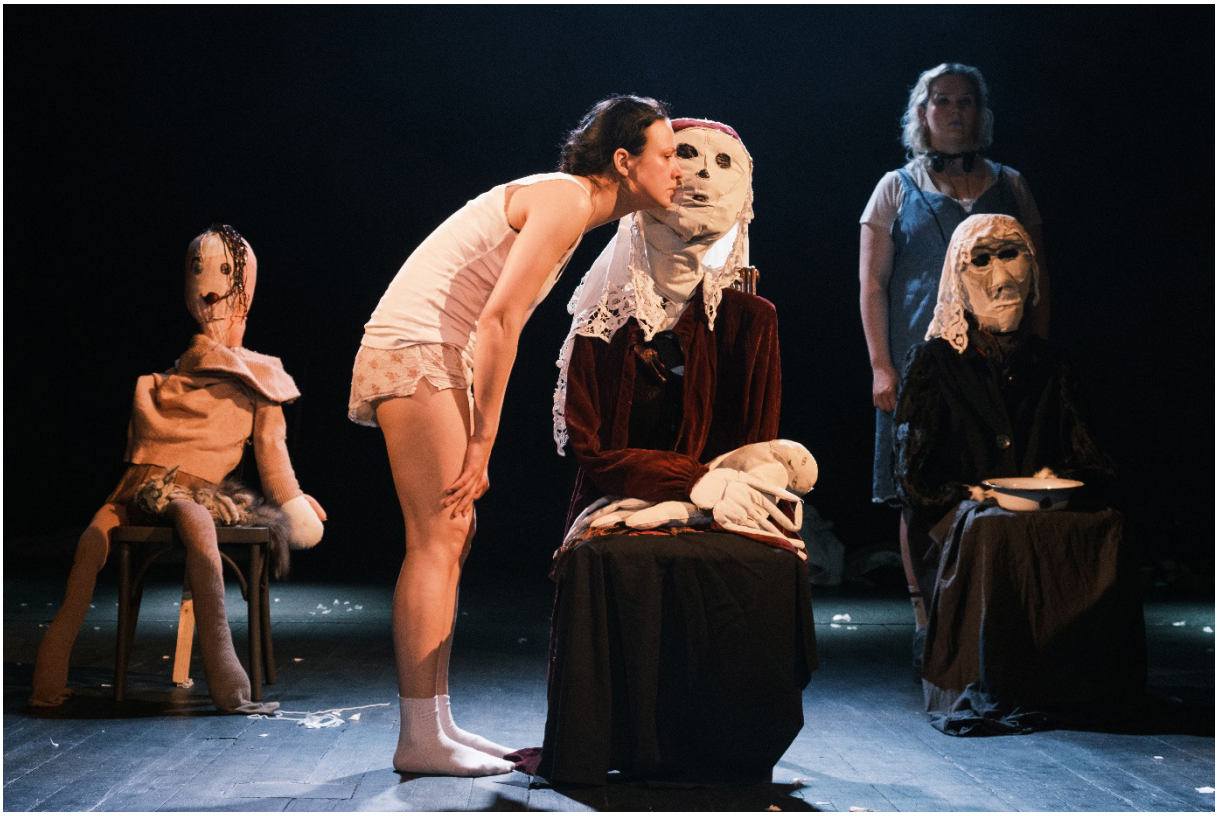

Figure 4. Knopa (Elena Makhova) talking to her mother before attempting to ransack the pharmacy, 2018, photographer Dmitriy Veselov, courtesy Soso Daughters.

The actresses manipulate the dolls like puppeteers. They control the dolls' movements, interact with them, and perform alongside them as if alongside human actors. Sorokina deliberately preserved a painterly vision of Georgian ethnic features and traditional clothes to create a likeness, a point of shared cultural memory and attachment (see Figure 4). Despite being inanimate objects, the dolls are constantly *active* in the construction of the play's atmosphere, even when they are not manipulated by the actresses. When they are covered by white sheets and invisible, they create a sense of tangible human bodies, ominously reminding one of unnamed corpses of war. When they are uncovered, their silent figures seem to witness the girls' every action, performing their silent roles as human beings.

For most of the dolls, their frame is made from the chairs on which they are seated. Their bony frames are the chairs' backs, their hard knees are the chairs' seats. In the moment when Ninzo is trying to feed her dying grandmother, which is embodied by one of the dolls, she places the bowl on her knees. The action produces a hard sound, as if her knees are so bony that the bowl chatters on them. When the old woman starts to cry, one of the actresses manipulates the doll's hand to scoop the water from the bowl and pour it on the doll-grandmother's face. In another episode, when Knopa fights with a boy for calling Ninzo names, Makhova grabs one of the dolls that represents the boy and trashes it around the stage, while Julia Skirina, who plays the boy, moves across the stage as if

she is being beaten. The constant negotiation between human bodies and the unanimated bodies of the dolls creates a certain sense of ritualism in the place where cruelty and hopelessness make the world appear disturbingly magical, where dolls are alive, and people are dead.

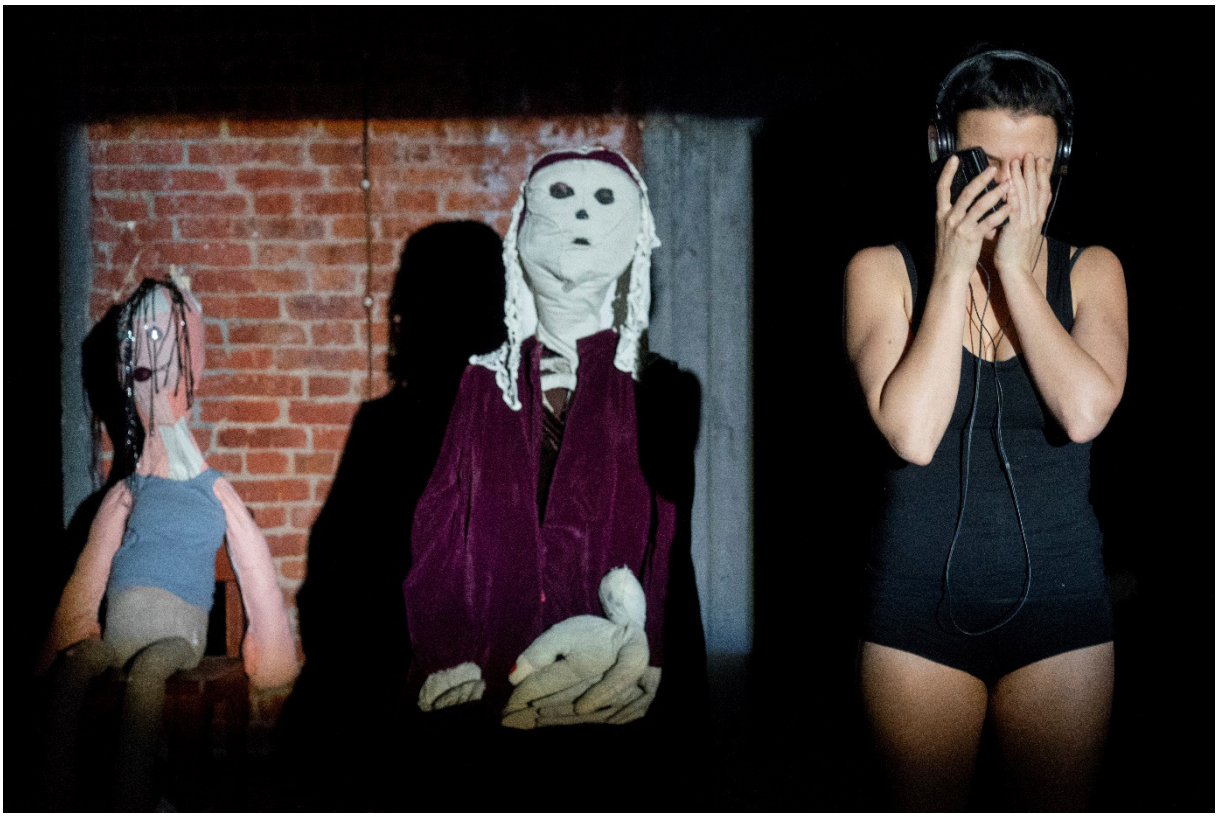

Figure 5. Knopa (Elena Makhova) before her death, 2018, photographer Aleksander Andrievich, courtesy Soso Daughters.

The final moment of the production depicts Knopa's death, something that is impossible to represent and equally impossible to escape. When Knopa decides to rob the pharmacy alone and, scared of the military dogs, runs through the minefield, Makhova is left completely alone on stage. She is semi-naked, emphasizing both her fragility and innocence in the face of impending death. The spotlight marks her face when she explains what is happening to her, as the figures in the background sit in darkness, as silent witnesses of her death, while she faces the spectators (see Figure 5).

As Hann remarks, scenography "does not 'make' place, but rather navigates place," making different aspects appear meaningful through the "crafting of place orientation."[52] When the play is seemingly over and the audience is lead through the arched pathway back to the first space, they pass extremely close to Knopa, who stands frozen, looking ahead with unseeing eyes. This passage

[52] Hann 2019, 23.

is a symbol for a possible but also, as it becomes clear throughout the play, mythical humanitarian corridor. It should let people out, but once you enter the *raggish world* of the play, it becomes clear that there is no corridor in this world of the still living, and the only way out is death.

As the spectators walk painfully slowly through the enclosed, darkened space, the voice of one of the soldiers reads names, ages, and details of executions of civilians who were killed in the Abkhazian war. Already weary from the intensity of the play, these words are hard to ignore, and they create a heavy atmosphere. Sara Ahmed warns against considering such feelings as something "closed" as it is exactly what makes "historical forms of injustice to disappear" and to allow these histories to be present is to "let go" of the closeness of bad feelings.[53] When the spectators return to the first room, the actresses are already standing around the table in complete silence. As Sergey Uschakin notes, "trauma strips the disadvantage of speech," that is why symbolical rituals, for instance, a moment of silence, "is the most effective tool in the expression of memory of irreplaceable."[54] When the play is over, the spectators are still asked to observe the ritual of silence in memory of those who are lost forever, as in the rhyme Knopa cites before her death. What the scenography of *The Rhyme* allows for is, in Pollock's words, a "potential sensing" of trauma, instead of a clear, structured narrative.[55] That last moment, which ties together the painful materiality of the play, the unseen death of the heroine, the ability to cross the corridor and the moment of silence, allows this *potential sensing* of the inexpressible to come together with the narrative of the production and the spectators' active participation in the construction of its atmosphere.

Cathy Caruth writes that "a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence"[56] that is, when the traumatic historical event takes place, it is not perceived and acknowledged fully, as it cannot be grasped in the moment when it transpires. Representation of trauma becomes a prism through which the history of it is apprehended and, to a certain extent, becomes visible. What the scenographic materiality of The Rhyme triggers is "an inherent latency within the experience," as Caruth refers to it.[57] As Griselda Pollock underlines "[i]f trauma is a perpetual present, it is also understood as a permanent absence."[58]

The Abkhazian war, or as it is often called, a war conflict, is hardly represented in a cultural context. It is one of the pages of post-Soviet history that is often left unknown and unaddressed. By addressing the experience of coming-of-age girls amid unruly war, Soso Daughters take the idea presented by Melaschvili further, by creating a production in which the experience of trauma comes as closely to a mere spectator as it possibly can, to remind once again that there are no winners in a war.

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53 Ahmed 2010, 50.
54 Uschakin 2009, 16.
55 Pollock 2009, 46.
56 Caruth 1996, 18.
57 Caruth 1996, 17.
58 Pollock 2009, 42.

Conclusion

Some time ago, in her interview with the independent news portal, Takie Dela, Berkovich suggested that the collective might have to break up after a few plays. The freedom that they possess in their creative practice – the rehearsals that can last as long as actresses need to feel the text or learn to sing each note properly, focus on details, lack of a repertoire or set dates for performances for a year ahead – is also something that cannot go on forever.[59] She explains that they will either have to change their format completely to escape the repetition or break up and move on.[60] However, at present, the collective continues its work, trying out new formats such as inviting a new director for their next production, performing existing productions almost every month, and hoping for open borders to be able to perform at international festivals.

By paying close attention to the creative practice of Soso Daughters, I wish to create a precedent for further studies on independent collectives in a Russian context and connect their practice to other geographical locations. To examine both their creative practice and potentials for "cultural intervention and political activism."[61]

By analysing their approach to the staging of trauma and traumatic experience, I wish to emphasize the value of such works in the context of Russian society. As Evgeny Dobrenko and Andrey Shcherbenok harshly and rightfully stress, in the core of contemporary Russian culture lies "suspension between the traumatic experiences of the past, both remote and quite recent, and an underdeveloped and unstable narrative about it."[62]It is not about how relevant this trauma is to the people who came to see the production, nationally, historically or geographically, but about the ability to come closer to something indescribable and to try to comprehend the experience of others.

I see the truth and recognition that transpires in Soso Daughters' creativity as a part of the resistance to "shadowing." Whether they are looking back, grappling to comprehend the insufferable, or uncovering an unseemly truth that stays hidden alongside our everyday normality. As Haughton writes, the staging of subjects that deal with different aspects of traumatic experience creates a "shared space" in which things unspeakable and ungraspable can potentially be articulated and acknowledged.[63] Furthermore, I see a clear potential for Soso Daughters' creative practice to be seen as an alternative space for, in the words of Alexander Etkind, an expression of "diversity and change" which is not arbitrated by "the interests of the state."[64] This is the expression that is so necessary in contemporary Russia. Not without reason does Marina Davydova, the editor of the special issue of *Teatr.* on independent theatre, underline that the emergence of independent theatre initiatives "makes it possible to judge the presence or absence of civil society in the country." [65]

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59 Polikhovich 2020.
60 Polikhovich 2020.
61 Haughton 2018, 12.
62 Dobrenko and Shcherbenok 2011, 77.
63 Haughton 2018, 2.
64 Etkind 2017, 49.
65 Davydova 2018.

AUTHOR
Olga Nikolaeva, PhD, is a postdoctoral researcher at Swedish Performing Arts Agency (Musikverket) and Aleksanteri Institute (University of Helsinki). She has a PhD in Art History and Visual Studies (University of Gothenburg) and holds a MA in Visual Culture (Lund University) and a Specialist Diploma in Art History (Russian State University for the Humanities). Olga's research interests lie primarily in the field of performances studies, with a specific focus on scenography and materiality. In her postdoctoral research Olga explores scenography of trauma in works of women directors and stage artists in contemporary Russian theatre. She is also working with music performances and media, focusing on the analysis of interrelations between bodies, screens, screen visuals and sound.

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