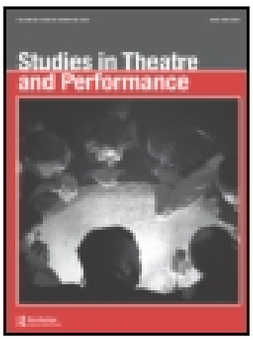

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'He did not go back to the army': war, patriotism and desertion in Pavel Pryazhko's *The Soldier*

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ABSTRACT

Over the past twenty years, a collection of theatre makers in Russia have staged suppressed and marginalised voices to engage with the political and social realities of contemporary Russia. The work of these innovative theatre practitioners has been collated under the idiom of New Drama (*Novaya Drama*). Previous studies of New Drama have placed an emphasis on the role of the text and the playwright's dynamic use of contemporary language. While acknowledging that these are important features of the New Drama repertoire, this article provides an alternative approach by examining the work of Pavel Pryazhko. This article explores Pryazhko's *The Soldier* (*Soldat*, 2011), in the context of the Second Chechen War and Vladimir Putin's revivification of the military in the public sphere. Through a detailed study of *The Soldier* in performance, this article contends that the production's content and form is vital in generating an oppositional discourse about the role of the military in contemporary Russian society. Pryazhko's eschewal of traditional notions of theatrical language and dialogic interaction in *The Soldier* disrupts the audience's expectations of what a theatre performance is, and subsequently facilitates a wider dialogue about the Kremlin's privileging of the military in Russia.

KEYWORDS

The soldier; pavel pryazhko; new drama; teatr.doc; russian theatre; vladimir putin

> We must explain to the entire generation of young people that the question of whether or not to serve in the army should not even come for a young person to begin with. We must all realize that without the army there would be no country. Nobody should have the slightest doubt on this score. No army, no Russia. (Vladimir Putin speaking with representative of a pro-presidential youth group in May 2006. Quoted in Blum 2006, 2)

On 1 October 1999, approximately 50,000 Russian soldiers advanced over the Dagestani-Chechen boarder, marking the start of the ground campaign of what would become known as the Second Chechen War (1999–2009). Three years earlier, the First Chechen War (1994–1996) had ended with a humiliating and unimaginable defeat for the Russian army and the Yeltsin administration after the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Chechen capital of Grozny in the face of pervasive public opinion against the war. Although Vladimir Putin officially concluded the end of the Second Chechen War in April 2002, the horrifying brutality of the military campaign meant that it became a paramount and defining juncture of his first two terms in office during the 2000s. The war was fundamental in shaping the nascent foundations of the Putin regime and

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provided a pretext for the state's diminution of press freedoms and independent correspondence. Putin freely exploited military symbols and rhetoric as part of a political strategy to create legitimacy for his own power. As Russian human rights activist Sergei Kovalev argues, Putin 'owes his accession to the presidency largely to his backing of the war' (Kovalev 2000). As this essay will explore, the war provided the place for a more prominent role for the military in Putin's state-building strategy in the 2000s, which included a re-emphasis on mandatory conscription as a patriotic duty required by all young Russian men.

When Putin succeeded Boris Yeltsin as President of Russia in December 1999, military success in Chechnya was his highest priority. He viewed the Second Chechen War as the defining feature in his incipient stage of securing power. Speaking in 2000, he reflected that 'my mission, my historical mission – and this will sound lofty, but it's true – consisted of resolving the situation in the Northern Caucasus' (Putin 2000, 139). The war came to define not only Putin's first tentative months in power, but also his presidency and domestic policies throughout his entire first term in office from the end of 1999 to 2004. The outbreak of the war saw the first gagging of the Russian media by Putin, with reporters pressurised to capitalise on the patriotic sentiment that swept through Russia in the early months of the conflict. Putin learnt from the mistakes made by the Yeltsin administration during the first Chechen war, which had been undone by public opinion in Russia, swayed by graphic and critical news reports from leading television networks. In the state media, Putin visually aligned himself with the war effort and the Russian troops fighting on the front line, engaging in grand theatrical spectacles that included flying into Chechnya in the co-pilot seat of a Su-25 jet a week prior to the presidential elections in March 2000. Putin came to embody the Russian war effort: 'Though Putin has little in common with military heroes,' (Goscilo 2013, 184) writes Helena Goscilo, 'the huge gallery of his PR photographs leaves no doubts that he appreciates the psychological significance of the next best thing – the spectacle of a leader wearing camouflage, owning a military-style Lada jeep, clutching weapons, and visiting army bases' (184).

The continued use of conscripted soldiers by the Kremlin in the Second Chechen War brought a renewed debate about desertion by young men who did not want to serve in the Russian army. Despite military rules barring new recruits from serving in conflict zones, conscripted soldiers were sent to fight on the front lines in Grozny and other areas of conflict. The Kremlin's re-emphasis on mandatory conscription as a patriotic duty required by all young Russian men underscored the political nature of serving in the Russian army. As Valerie Sperling writes in her book *Sex, Politics and Putin: Political Legitimacy*, 'in the eyes of the Kremlin, army service and submission to military conscription are both direct forms of supporting the state' (Sperling 2014, 129). Moreover, Peter Baker and Susan Glasser have conducted vital research into desertion in the Russian army in the 2000s, linking the rising phenomenon to the violent hazing of young conscripts by their seniors known as *dedovshchina* (Baker and Glasser 2004, 198). This brutal aspect of military service that has been ingrained into the Russian army since before the disintegration of the Soviet Union has been linked to a list of shocking statistics, prompting Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya to ask the question: 'what would you think of an army in which, in a single year, 2002, a battalion, more than 500 men, had been killed not fighting a war but from beatings?' (Politkovskaya 2004, 3).

Richard Sakwa further records that 1,000 conscript soldiers a year committed suicide throughout the 2000s 'as a result of various barbaric initiation ceremonies and *dedovshchina*' (Sakwa 2008, 396).

Against this controversial background of military conscription has been the revivification of the military and soldiers' bodies in public performances and spaces. The auxesis of the annual commemoration of the Soviet Union's victory in the Second World War on 9 May has formed a central pillar of Putin's societal rehabilitation of the military in the 2000s and 2010s. The spectacle is a panoply of the country's military strength and by proxy has aggressively reaffirmed the importance of Putin to Russia's re-emergence on the world stage. Bolstered by state media, the Kremlin have also organised a number of theatrical military spectacles in public spaces that have served as patriotic propaganda to promote a militarised ideal of masculinity and legitimise the ideology of the Russian government. In addition, Pro-Putin youth groups such as *Nashi* (Ours) and its militant wing *Stal* (Steel) have portrayed a militarised hegemonic masculinity through public activism that includes gatherings of young activists dressed in military uniform. In this way, the state's promotion of military patriotism and masculinity is achieved through the mediatised and embodied presence of the male soldier, as well as Putin's own martial public performances. These theatrical spectacles have aimed to distort and conceal more violent aspects of the military, including acts of *dedovshchina* and their psychological impact on young conscript soldiers. Instead, the Kremlin has fabricated a sanitised narrative for mass audiences, which propagates militarised masculinity and remains central to Putin's state-building strategy and the advance of authoritarian and centralised power structures in the country.

It is within this context that Pavel Pryazhko's play *The Soldier* (*Soldat*, 2011) raises urgent questions about the purpose of the Russian army's continuing policy of conscripting young men. *The Soldier* is a collaboration between Belarusian playwright Pryazhko and Russian director Dmitry Volkostrelov. Pryazhko emerged as an important voice in Russian-language playwriting in the mid-2000s. His theatre is synonymous with the work of a collection of practitioners that has been collated under the idiom of New Drama (*Novaya Drama*). Emerging in the early 2000s during a period of volatile social and political change in the country, New Drama was responsible for drawing a younger audience to the theatre and reviving Russian drama at a time when many critics argued that dramatic writing and production had stagnated. As Amy Skinner has recently observed, the historically dominant role of the stage director in Russia has exerted a 'significant influence' over the development of the nation's theatre practice in the twentieth century and beyond, which has privileged a 'director's theatre' over the playwright in the creative process (Skinner 2019, 2). New Drama instead established itself as a playwright-led development that emphasises the writer's creative practice and potential. A new generation of dramatists who had come of age after the collapse of communism began to use contemporary parlance in their plays to tell stories that reflected the changing class structures in post-Soviet Russia and highlighted the relatable experiences of individuals excluded from public discourse and space. The protagonists in early New Drama plays were often the product of the Russia's turbulence development of a free market, capitalist economy, living in the violent and hyper-sexualised world of the provinces. The graphic portrayal of these lives on stage made visible a demographic

that had been marginalised and disadvantaged by the emergence of the neoliberal policies of the Putin era, revealing the corruption and social inequality of the early 2000s.

Using a variety of disparate theatrical techniques, New Drama writers depicted characters that spoke recognisable and realistic dialogue as well as conversational language familiar to young Russians. For example, theatre critic Alena Karas sees the primary appeal of New Drama arising from its forceful portrayal of 'authentic street language' ('*nastoyashchim yazykom ulits*') used in twenty-first century Russia and the frequent and affective use of violent sexualised language (Karas 2004). These innovative new linguistic aesthetics provided the opportunity for playwrights to base their work on their actual lived experiences and experiment with the expression of new forms of social critique. In doing so, New Drama writers have provocatively confronted political injustices and widening social inequality, challenging Putin's autocratic rule and official state-sanctioned rhetoric that has aimed to divide individuals across the country.

Pryazhko's diverse output spans longer texted-based productions to shorter performances that play with theatrical form and challenge the structure of New Drama.[1] As John Freedman contends, 'over the years [Pryazhko's] plays have grown and transformed into a body of work as unique and influential as that of any other playwright of his time' (Freedman 2014a, 110). Despite this, however, there are limited English- language studies that consider Pryazhko and his theatrical output.[2] This article aims to fill a gap in that scholarship and expand on previous English-language work on new theatre writing in Russia by examining *The Soldier* in relation to Vladimir Putin's fervent revivification of militarised patriotism and the complex legacy of the Second Chechen War.

The Soldier premiered at Teatr.doc in central Moscow on 23 December 2011 and was staged in an unused office space next to the theatre's main performance space, which is where I first saw the production in November 2012. The show consists of fifteen minutes of silent, diurnal actions performed by a single actor with only one line of text spoken at the end, depicting a young conscript soldier's final agonising moments before he takes the courageous decision to desert from the Russian army. Drawing on a close reading of my own experiences of attending performances of *The Soldier* at Teatr.doc,[3] this article investigates how the production provides a vital critique of one of the core institutional foundations of the Putin regime, the role of the military in contemporary Russian life, through its generation of an oppositional discourse about it. I argue that the play foregrounds the status of the Second Chechen War as an important facet in Putin's political legitimacy and leadership, as well the lack of official acknowledgement of the experiences of Russian veterans of the Chechen Wars (*Chechentsy*). Moreover, this study considers how by removing the playtext and challenging its audience's pre-conceived understanding of New Drama, Pryazhko provokes a crucial reinterpretation of the increasingly autocratic politics of the Putin regime. Previous studies of New Drama have placed an emphasis on the role of the text and the playwright's dynamic use of contemporary language. While acknowledging that these are important features of the New Drama repertoire, I aim to facilitate a wider discussion on how *The Soldier* directly interrogates the strengthening of the army and patriotic values in twenty-first century Russia. In this way, I will demonstrate the political potency of New Drama in its facilitation of the creation of new discourses on contemporary Russian politics that run in opposition to the established rhetoric of the Putin regime.

In the next section of this article, I will historicise the development of New Drama in light of how these practitioners have positioned their work as a profound shift in theatrical conventions and practices. I will suggest that *The Soldier* represents a departure from the New Drama canon that redefines notions of dramatic language and the artistic role of the playwright in contemporary Russia. The following section provides a detailed analysis of my own experience of attending *The Soldier*, contextualising how the nuanced performance of a private moment provides a radical rejection of the Kremlin's wider militarised rhetoric and Putin's own heavily mediatised public performances during the Second Chechen War. I then examine how the production's content and form provokes a challenge to audience members' notions of theatre, arguing that *The Soldier* provides a vital artistic engagement with the politics of the Putin regime and the restoration of militarised patriotism through its staging strategies and communicative silence. In the final section, I draw on Maya Eichler's study *Militarizing Men: Gender, Conscription and War in Post-Soviet Russia* to analyse how *The Soldier* intervenes in Putin's public reframing of patriotism and reinforcement of militarised gender norms by subverting idealised stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity. By examining representations of military tropes in *The Soldier*, this article demonstrates New Drama's capacity to both interrogate substantive political anxieties and foreground the experiences of marginalised citizens. This serves to provide a specific reflection on the artistic evolution of New Drama, as it continues to remain at the forefront of experimental theatrical practice in Russia.

New Russian drama

'New Drama for me means simply that there are new plays', remarks influential theatre director Kirill Serebrennikov when providing his appraisal of the New Drama form (Serebrennikov 2009, 9). Reflecting on the explosion of new theatre writing that occurred in Russia in the 2000s, Serebrennikov observes that, in his opinion, 'New Drama is a transitional phenomenon; the term should be forgotten, or applied to the late 1990s and early 2000s' (Serebrennikov 2009, 9). Notably, John Freedman refutes Serebrennikov's laconic assertion: Freedman contends that New Drama can in fact be defined through a number of important recurring thematic characteristics and linguistic traits, noting that 'whether you like it or not, New Drama is not all modern Russian drama' (Freedman 2011). While the aim of this study is not to consider what constitutes a piece of New Drama, Serebrennikov and Freedman's conflicting comments are significant in the context of this article. Their claims both highlight a dynamic shift in the dramatic landscape that occurred at the turn of the millennium, which saw the emergence of a new playwriting culture and the revival of the playwright in the Russian theatre. As I have noted above, Russian theatre has historically emphasised the director as the primary creative force in the facilitation of new work. This unexpected artistic development triggered a vigorous debate amongst critics and practitioners about the creative role and function of the writer in dramatic practice, resulting in the creation of a new cultural discourse on contemporary Russian drama.

The rise of new playwriting in the early 2000s was facilitated by the artistic ambition of a collection of writers to repudiate the thematic and aesthetic constraints that had been previously been placed on Russian theatre by Soviet censorship and to redefine creative

practices that had long existed in the country. Inspired by a series of workshops staged by the Royal Court Theatre's International Department in 1999 and 2000, these dynamic writers created plays that expose and indict aspects of social atrophy and institutional corruption under the presidency of Vladimir Putin.[4] Originally applied by theatre practitioners eager to brand and promote this boom in new writing, the New Drama idiom was seized upon by theatre critics and journalists who viewed this burgeoning cultural phenomenon as an exciting and controversial revolution in Russian theatre.[5] New Drama emerged as a playwright-led development that privileged the writer in the creative process. During this period, a number of playwrights including Elena Gremina, Mikhail Ugarov, Alexei Kazantsev, and Nikolai Kolyada founded their own independent studio theatres and started directing their own work.[6] The establishment of a number of playwriting festivals including the Lyubimovka New Play Festival and the May Readings Festival in Togliatti additionally offered writers the chance to have their worked performed in the development stage of the creative process in immensely popular informal readings. These new performance spaces and festivals were created with the playwright at the center of the artistic process, allowing for a more collaborative and flexible approach to theatre-making. They provided a new generation of young and inexperienced writers with a creative outlet to stage their own productions, develop their craft through rehearsed readings, and experiment with new aesthetics.

Writing in the 'New Drama Manifesto' (*Manifest Novoi Drami*), Ugarov explicitly foregrounds how the 'rejection of contemporary authors by the theatre' has served as a provocation for the movement (Ugarov 2004). In other words, Ugarov positions the work of New Drama practitioners as a profound rejection of dominant dramaturgies and creative ways of working. His assertion points to the fact that since the collapse of the Soviet Union programmes at repertory theatres have been dominated by revivals of canonical texts and authors. As Eduard Boyakov, founder of Praktika Theatre and the New Drama Festival, observed in 2006: 'most directors are too intimidated to stage daring and controversial modern plays, preferring either to hide behind the big names of the past or indulge in fantasy' (quoted in Ross 2006, 34–5). Moreover, the fostering of a dialogue with active playwrights has historically never been a priority in the formal education of directors and actors. This has famously resulted in Russian directors assuming the role of auteurs, whose control and authority over the production is unquestioned.[7] By creating a new set of theatrical conventions and experimenting with daring forms of socially-engaged theatre, New Drama has helped to disrupt the traditional status quo of the country's state-theatres and established itself as arguably the most influential artistic movement in contemporary Russia. It represents a radically profound shift in the cultural and artistic landscape, which has fundamentally reinscribed how theatre and performance is created, programmed, and understood.

Critics were quick to label and define the linguistic features of New Drama, foregrounding the use of quotidian language, contemporary Russian vernacular, and obscene profanities, known in Russian as *mat*.[8] Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky's pioneering study *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama* – which remains the only full-length English language study of New Drama – provides a further nuanced exploration and emphasis on the role of the text and the dynamic use of contemporary language in New Drama. Beumers and Lipovetsky contextualise the movement within the framework of violence

in Soviet and post-Soviet society, analysing how playwrights have articulated cultural and linguistic developments in modern Russia. Examining the work of writers including Vasilii Sigarev, Ivan Vyrypaev, and Vladimir and Oleg Presniakov, they argue that 'the emergence of drama as one of the most innovative genres in the new millennium may be explained by the need to test new forms of social communication' (2009, 135). They further underscore the playwrights' use of language as the leading creative component of the movement, attending to the role of text-based dramaturgy in exposing 'discourses of violence' in Russia (Beumers and Lipovetsky 2009, 301). Thus, Beumers and Lipovetsky contend that: 'New Drama has served one major purpose: to innovate both dramatic and theatrical language' (Beumers and Lipovetsky 2009, 301).

In this paper I want to move beyond the important analysis of the linguistic potential of New Drama to establish a wider basis for understanding the significance of the movement in relation to the increasingly coercive and nationalistic politics of the Putin regime. I suggest that Pryazhko's *The Soldier* is an example that demonstrates how New Drama does not always depend on the presence of a theatrical text in its innovative staging of contemporary Russian politics and society. Instead, the performance focuses on witnessing the everyday acts of a young conscript soldier in a quiet and intimate space that heighten the tension and poignancy inherent in the situation Pryazhko presents. I argue that *The Soldier* takes a radically disparate theatrical form and structure to previous New Drama productions to call into question the dominant representations of the Chechen Wars, militarised patriotism, and conscription propagated by the Kremlin to silences alternative ideologies and experiences. In the remainder of the article, therefore, I will explore the implications of the production on the evolution and definition of New Drama by examining how the piece provides a vital artistic engagement with the politics of the Putin regime, provoking a wider debate on how the autocratic nature of the Government can be challenged and subverted. I will start by providing a detailed analysis of my own experience of attending *The Soldier*, focusing on how the nuanced performance of a private moment prompts reflection on the wider official rhetoric of the state.

The performance: 'He did not go back to the army'

The house lights are turned off on the small congregation gathered at Teatr.doc's second space, and the audience's attention is immediately drawn to the sound of running water occurring somewhere off stage. Initially, it is unclear if this is part of the show, but the answer is soon revealed by the broadcast of a live video feed that begins to play on a large projection screen hanging on the back wall of the space. On the screen, the audience sees a video of a naked young man with short, cropped blonde hair standing under a running shower (see Image 1). Most audience members will already be aware of the production's title, so the obvious assumption made at this point in the performance is that the man who is visible in the film is a young soldier in the Russian army. The audience becomes aware that they are engaging in an act of voyeurism on a private moment of intense reflection as they watch the man, who is only filmed from the waist up, slowly and assiduously washing himself. As he showers, the young soldier appears to be caught in emotional turmoil. For long periods of time, he stands directly under the showerhead

Image 1. *The Soldier* (dir. Dmitry Volkostrelov), Teatr.doc, Moscow, 2011. Photo: Evgeny Lyulyukin. Courtesy of Teatr.doc.

staring upwards towards the ceiling in contemplation, spitting out the shower water that runs into his mouth. At other moments, he paces around the small cubicle, conveying what appears to be an inexorable and unspeakable anxiety.

At this point in the performance, I felt that the actor's staged unease was mirrored by my own discomfort at witnessing this intimate act of ablution unfold. This unease was also

provoked by the theatrical anomaly of the performer's absence from the stage and our only access to the action manifesting through the medium of film. This physical barrier between the actor's actions offstage creates a frisson of anticipation as the audience wait for a revelation into the psyche of the character. In one review of the production, Marina Raikina (2011), arts editor of daily tabloid newspaper *Moskovskij Komsomolets*, describes her experience of watching the performance and trying to consider the antecedent events to justify the man's agitation. She contends that it immediately raises questions about the negative perception of the army in contemporary Russia (Raikina 2011). As I have discussed above, the military has become a site of contested political narratives accruing from Putin's prominent revivification of the military in civil society and his own publicity stunts that portray him as a decisive politician of action. While *The Soldier* never explicitly excoriates the Kremlin's policies, the filming of an actor taking a shower offstage invites the audience to consider how the character's assumed identity as a young soldier impacts on their consideration of his motives. Through just a title and the projected film of the habitual act of washing, the play already provokes important considerations of Putinism and a salient anxiety about the role of the military in contemporary Russian politics and society. It further underscores the tactics employed by the Kremlin and eschews the sensationalist and manipulated state coverage of the Second Chechen War that has served to reinforce the Putin regime's coercive authoritarianism. By doing so, the performance encourages a critical reinterpretation of constructed spectacles of martial strength and conflict as they have occurred in twenty-first century Russia.

After around five minutes, the man turns off the shower and reaches for a towel that has been hanging out of shot. He undertakes the task of drying himself with the same sedulous attention as when washing, starting with his hair and meticulously working his way down his torso. The diurnal action played out in a typical domestic setting means that the audience search for meaning in every action taken by actor Pavel Chinarev. John Freedman observes that director of the piece, Volkostrelov, 'had attuned our sense of hearing to nuances with the long, monotonous, but not entirely repetitive sound of running water [. . .] helping us to construct a detailed narrative in our minds' (Freedman 2014b, 51). Simultaneously, the detailed tight shot of the actor's face and upper body irradiates every facial expression and physical action in greater clarity than if he was present on stage, highlighting the somatic narrative of Pryazhko's play (see Image 2). The structure of the performance implies that, from the very start of *The Soldier*, the audience's attention is focused on the corporeal semiotics of the actor's body. Moreover, the live projection not only counters the sensationalist mainstream media coverage of the Second Chechen War but also invites the audience to consider the significance of how visual media can be constructed and manipulated to promote political interests and construct normative political discourses.

At this moment, a spot light is slowly raised on a small section of the performance space, illuminating the single piece of set dressing in the room: an office chair with an army uniform neatly folded over it. With the towel now wrapped around his waist the soldier emerges from the shower room and into the corridor becoming visible in the flesh to the audience for the first time. In this precise moment, he can be glimpsed both standing down the corridor while also still visible on the video stream, confirming to the audience that the projection they have been watching is live. He silently walks down the narrow hallway towards the audience in an understated manner before turning

Image 2. Pavel Chinarev in *The Soldier*, Teatr.doc, Moscow, 2011. Photo: Polina Koroleva. Courtesy of Teatr.doc.

right into a second room that is again hidden from sight. Unlike the shower room, however, this area is not filmed, and instead the audience must rely only on the sounds that he makes to infer the actions that are occurring. Although obscured from view, the sounds that emanate from the adjacent room are clear for everyone to recognise:

a microwave is being turned on and a hot drink is prepared. At this point, Volkostrelov inserts a deliberate lacuna in the physical narrative of the performance, as in contrast to the shower scene, we cannot see the young man's actions or expressions in this second room. I was left wondering if something happened in that moment un-witnessed by the audience that could have impacted on the character's final actions in the play.

These final moments occur as the young man enters the corridor again, standing at the entrance to the main performance space facing the audience. Under the bright spotlight he is still visibly wet from his preceding shower and remains undressed apart from the towel that conceals his body below the waist. Despite his heightened vulnerability, standing almost naked in front of an expectant crowd, he appears calm and collected, leaning against the door and surveying the room. After the prolonged silence, the audience hang on every word as finally he speaks slowly and purposefully, delivering the play's two brief lines:

> The soldier came home on leave. When it came time to return to the army, he did not go back to the army.[9]

He then steps back closing the door behind him, as the room fades to a black out.

Silence and debate: *The Soldier* in the new drama canon

The first question that needs to be addressed in a consideration of *The Soldier* is: how can a piece of theatre that eschews a conventional written playtext be included in the canon of New Drama, an idiom that specifically privileges the importance of language and the re-emergence of the playwright in contemporary Russian theatre? New Drama is a mercurial artistic term that describes manifold productions and theatrical genres. Writers rarely concentrate on one specific genre, often shifting between producing documentary theatre, comic satire, and plays with more experimental theatrical structures. Pryazhko himself asserts that New Drama can take varied theatrical forms and is defined by its consideration of the 'everyday individual experience. The language and structure of the text can take any form you want. It's not about them' (2011).[10] Theatre critic Pavel Rudnev has elaborated on this explanation, observing that Pryazhko's theatre is directly responsible for the evolution of the New Drama repertoire and the theatrical conventions that define it:

> Pryazhko was able to change the course of development of modern plays in Russia. He turned the 'New Drama' from the drama of the theme and the drama of the language, to a discussion around the structure of the modern play. He made the form of the text and the language of the play topics for discussion. Prior to Pryazhko, the 'New Drama' was clinging, first of all, to plots, boundary conditions. (Rudnev 2010)

For Rudnev, then, Pryazhko's playful deconstruction of the established conventions of playwriting in twenty-first century Russia has resulted in the enlivening of a debate about the form and codification of New Drama.

I would further contend that Pryazhko's engagement with the political and social realities in contemporary Russia in *The Soldier* unites the play with the diverse body of New Drama productions through its vital critique of Putin's calculated reframing of the army and military institutions. In an interview given with journalist and theatre-maker

Tatiana Artimovich, Pryazhko discusses the original concept for the play: 'I began to build a story,' he contends, 'I followed the conventions of plot construction and created some characters [. . .] and suddenly I realised that what I needed was only two sentences, and that this was the only option' (quoted in Artimovich 2011). By condensing the show to fifteen minutes of action and two lines of text, Pryazhko directly addresses contemporary anxieties surrounding the Russian military, conscription, and desertion. The ephemeral performance directs the audience to consider the importance of the soldier's reticence during the piece.

In her monograph *Watching War on the Twenty-First Century Stage: Spectacles of Conflict*, Clare Finburgh argues that since the start of the twenty-first century, military conflict and spectacle 'have joined forces in way that are more powerful now, than ever' (Finburgh 2017, 3). Finburgh suggests that as modern technology reinscribes how images of military conflict are broadcast and consumed by a mass audience, these spectacles are manipulated to maintain dominant political positions as well as for economic gain. She writes that: 'Increasingly, war and its mediation as spectacle are difficult to separate out from one another, as the capacity of the media to shape public perception even to win wars, increases with the rise of the presence of those media' (Finburgh 2017, 13). In her exploration of how war and conflict are manipulated for political gains, Finburgh illustrates how a variety of theatre productions have:

> encouraged us to watch war and other forms of conflict and violence with more attention: attention to the ways in which what we watch is framed as spectacle, and how those spectacles might seek to impose certain ideologies on us; or else simply try to shift more newspapers off shelves or else attempt to attract more war watchers to channels, stations and website (Finburgh 2017, 12).

In other words, Finburgh maintains the importance of theatre as a site of intervention that generates crucial reflection and critique on the ways in which distorted spectacles of military conflict are represented by mainstream media.

In *The Soldier*, the powerful employment of unseen action that occurs offstage and the use of minimal speech challenges and resists the spectacle of military conflict in Putin's Russia. Pryazhko and Volkostrelov knowingly reject the dominant spectacles of war constructed by centralised media throughout Putin's presidency. By avoiding sensationalised images of war and conflict, *The Soldier* demonstrates how the public perception of military conflict and power can be distorted and challenged, prompting the audience to question the state's wider use of oppressive measures to impose restrictive political narratives. By stripping back the performance and placing the everyday actions of a young soldier at the heart of the piece, the production resists and interrupts the overwhelming use of militarised patriotism that strengthen Putin's grip on power. The camera's instantaneous mediation of the soldier's ritualised washing at the start of the performance captures the contrast between this private moment of cleansing and acts of institutional militarised violence. The live video projection prioritises the private realm offstage, visually navigating the intersection between the personal and political to take on a form of enacted private resistance and symbolically reinforcing how this act of purging oneself doubles as both a moment of personal reflection and a potent consideration of wider public manipulation. At the same time, this political act brings into focus how the military spectacles deployed by the state have legitimised the Putin regime, silencing

those who do not conform and labeling them as a dangerous fifth column in Russian society. In this way, the performance offers a crucial opportunity to expose the Kremlin's revival of militarised propaganda and renegotiate the role of the military.

As I have detailed above, the legacy of the Second Chechen War has cast a prominent and enduring shadow over the development of the Russian state in the twenty-first century. As Dmitry Muratov soberly reflected in 2014: 'all that is happening today is but a consequence of this war' (Muratov 2014). The war consolidated Putin's nascent presidency and enabled the Kremlin to purge the independent media empires that had emerged in the 1990s in a rescinding of press freedoms. In addition, the Kremlin recognised the value that militarised patriotism held in aggressively reaffirming the political status quo by demonising those who do not obsequiously conform to these principles. The communicative silence in *The Soldier* opens and augments potential reflection on the Russian military's contentious engagements in Chechnya. The play has been acknowledged as one of the most politically provocative productions of the twenty-first century. Maria Shevtsova interprets *The Soldier* as 'protest at its most matter-of-fact; protest that could not be denied' (Shevtsova 2015). Writing in *Teatr* journal, Elena Levinskaia similarly contends that the play is an act of fulmination and a provocative 'manifesto, a radical gesture of refusal [. . .] a gesture of rejection of obsolete institutions' (Levinskaia 2012, 27). By playing on specific unease and questions surrounding Putin's militarisation of the public sphere, *The Soldier* acts as a conduit for raising political debate about the state's use of spectacle as a means to district from the ways in which military violence supports governmental structures through its evocation of Russia's bloody involvement in the Second Chechen War, *dedovshchina*, and conscription. Although the performance does not explicitly name or list these subjects, what is significant in the play's exploration of contemporary attitudes towards the Russian army is that the act of desertion by a young soldier asks an important question in contemporary Russia: should the country's youth have the choice about whether to serve in the army or not?

In an attempt to explore this, *The Soldier* does not offer up an explicit answer to the question it poses. Instead, Pryazhko and Volkostrelov encourage their audience to fill in their own narrative for the soldier's actions during the performance.[11] I contend that the production's form, which challenges preconceived notions of New Drama, is vital in generating a discourse about the role of the military in contemporary Russian life. Returning to their study of New Drama, Beumers and Lipovetsky conclude that 'the plays discussed in this volume render violence of trauma through language, through the interaction between characters, and through the organisation of theatrical performance' (Beumers and Lipovetsky 2009, 301). In *The Soldier*, it is precisely the lack of 'language' or dialogic 'interaction' that communicates a potential embodied narrative to the audience. The soldier's communicative silence throughout the performance hints at an ineffable trauma suffered by the young man that provokes important and varied discussion on the role of the army in modern Russia.

Each performance of *The Soldier* is followed by a post-show discussion between the audience and the artistic team behind the production. Although the piece provokes a series of question relating to the soldier's actions and his decision to desert the army, the post-show discussions often start with an emotive and heated debate about the form of the production. For example, in the post-show conversation that took place on the

show's opening night, audience members interrogated Pryazhko, Volkostrelov, and Teatr.doc's co-founder Ugarov.[12] For some audience members, the form the performance took was artistically provocative and at odds with their perception of theatre, with one speaker asking 'how is this a viable form of theatre?' A second raised the issue that they did not believe they had watched a piece of theatre, instead contending that 'this is a movie', while another jokingly asked for a refund of their money. The conversations about the performance's structure often facilitate a more detailed debate on the Russian military. In the post-show discussions I have access to and have witnessed at the theatre, many of the men in the audience respond to the play by animatedly sharing their own experiences of military service, recalling where they were based and considering the impact it had on their lives. By challenging the audience's expectations of what a theatre performance is, *The Soldier* provokes a debate on the nature of the performance that subsequently facilitates a wider dialogue about the Kremlin's privileging of the military in Russia.

The staging strategies employed in the production place the audience and the center of the work, encouraging each spectator to imagine the action as it occurs offstage and implicating them in the moment of the performance. The use of projection as mediation in an otherwise empty performance space further renegotiates the ways in which the conflicting boundaries between public and hidden citizens have come to be enacted, challenging the audience to imagine what is happening outside of what is visible in public life and raising crucial questions about the manner in which male soldiers are characterised and imagined in Russia. In addition, Pryazhko's use of the third person in the only lines spoken in the play hints at the wider impact of Putin's militarised patriotism and the continued use of conscription throughout Russian society as a whole. In this way, *The Soldier* acts as a locus of cathartic reflection for audience members to witness, acknowledge, debate, and engage with the impact of conscription not only in a theatrical context, but also its impact on themselves and their companions at Teatr.doc that evening. In doing so, the performance makes marginalised citizens visible as political subjects, enabling the audience to articulate their own experiences and opinions about military conscription during the post-show discussions as well as making a crucial contribution to the creation of significant new counter-discourses that confront the repressive politics of Putinism.

Embodied narratives and hegemonic masculinity

In her 2012 monograph *Militarizing Men*, Maya Eichler addresses these pertinent political anxieties surrounding the Kremlin's policies of conscription and the role of the military in the public sphere, providing a detailed investigation into the impact of the Chechen Wars on militarised gender identities. Eichler's study offers an important insight into the development and re-integration of the military's role in civil society by the Putin administration, identifying an active 'link between military service and patriotism' (Eichler 2012, 85). Drawing on interviews with *Chechentsy*, Eichler investigates 'the relationship between men's identities and the Russian state's conscription policy and the waging of war in Chechnya' (Eichler 2012, 3). She contends that Putin's authority is legitimised by his manipulation of the army to emphasise militarised notions of masculinity, foregrounding the political importance of military service and the role of soldiers

and war veterans as a contested site of hegemonic masculinity in contemporary Russia. Eichler argues that Putin's 'ability to portray an image of reinvigorated masculinity' during the Second Chechen War contributed to the restoration of the military in Russian politics and public life (Eichler 2012, 56). Putin's use and appropriation of militarised masculinity helped legitimise and gain public approval for the war amongst the electorate: 'The image of the soldier became personification of Putin's appeal to the prestige of the military [. . .] tighter control of the media coverage during the second war meant that the image of the un-heroic conscript soldier was less visible than in the first war' (Eichler 2012, 51). Because *Chechentsy* have been lionised as totemic paragons of masculinity, military service, and patriotism for Russia's younger generations, returning veterans had been coerced into conforming to a restrictive paradigm of warrior heroes. Therefore, Eichler contends that *Chechentsy* who do not conform to the normative ideal of 'tough and heroic warriors' are marginalised by the Kremlin's official narrative of the war (Eichler 2012, 134).

Eichler frames her debates within the hierarchical model of gender that asserts patriarchal power defined by R. W. Connell as 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 1987, 183–90). Significantly, Connell identifies the military as the most 'important [institution] for the definition of hegemonic masculinity in European/American culture', and views the figure of the hero as central to the Western cultural imagery of masculinity (Connell 2005, 213). In this way, the military 'has to be understood in terms of relationships between masculinities' (Connell 1987, 128). This view is shared by David Morgan, who identifies the military as significant in the defining of hegemonic masculinity:

> Of all the sites where masculinities are constructed, reproduced, and deployed, those associated with war and the military are of the most direct. Despite far reaching political, social, and technological changes, the warrior still seems to be a key symbol of masculinity. (Morgan 1994, 165)

Connell and Morgan's accounts of the structure of masculinity reveal how the dominant discourse around the military and soldiers enforces an idealised hegemon that dominates over other forms of subordinate masculinities. By positioning the military as a key institution in the construction of hegemonic masculinity, soldiers who do not conform to the hegemonic ideal of tough and heroic warriors are marginalised by the Kremlin's official narrative of the Chechen wars and the role of the army in twenty-first century Russia.

Eichler builds on Connell's examination of hegemonic masculinity, noting that the term 'militarised masculinity' can help explain how the hegemonic order of masculinity is constructed and maintained in the military. She argues that the concept of militarised masculinity can 'challenge us to think about how masculinities and men *become* militarized [. . .] rather than to assume and accept that men are essentially militaristic' (Eichler 2012, 7). In this way, Eichler avoids the simplistic assumption that men are naturally militaristic or that a there is an inherent link between masculinity and the military. It is also important to observe that while there has been a significant increase in female soldiers serving in the Russian army which has the potential power to dismantle the gendered order inherent in the institution, only a very small minority of women have been able to achieve influence and status within the military (Mathers 2006, 211). Conversely then, women's achievements in the armed forces have been deemphasised

and marginalised. This has reinforced established gender hierarchies and conventions, meaning that the idealised, hegemonic image of the militant warrior maintains it dominance. This has been underscored by Eichler, who contends that 'the link between military and the media depict female soldiers in a way that reinscribes the link between masculinity and the military' (Eichler 2012, 74).[13] Furthermore, the controversial use of male conscript soldiers in the two Chechen wars has placed a greater emphasis on men's role within the military, reinforcing the state's constructed notion of militarised masculinity and the idea that military service is allied to the concept of becoming a 'real man'.

The embodied presence of the male actor in *The Soldier* intersects with the Putin regime's employment of media-friendly PR stunts that saturate contemporary broadcasting. By challenging the connection between hegemonic masculinity and the success of the Putin regime, the production aims to disrupt the state-sanctioned discourse that ignores and marginalises young men who do not conform to this ideal. The soldier's body in the form of actor Pavel Chinarev is visible to the audience during almost the entire performance both on stage and through the live video stream. Through the projection of the video stream, Pryazhko and Volkostrelov highlight how the coverage of military intervention such as the Second Chechen War and martial parades have become highly mediated by the state through the Kremlin's co-option of the mass media. As I have noted, during the Second Chechen War, Putin completed a number of high profile macho stunts that aligned him with the war effort and attempted to propagate him as the icon of militarised hegemonic masculinity. Meanwhile, veterans from both Chechen Wars have been foregrounded in the public sphere as patriotic heroes who validate Putin's emphasis on military values and conscription. Paradoxically, Pryazhko and Volkostrelov challenge these idealised stereotypes of militarised masculinity in the embodied enactment of the everyday tasks performed by the soldier. Volkostrelov's directorial focus on the diurnal actions of the character asks the audience to interpret the production as more legitimate than the heavily constructed and choreographed representations of military vigour presented by pro-Putin youth groups, state news reports, and Putin's own public performances during the Second Chechen War.

The image of the naked male body in the production has further implications for how Pryazhko and Volkostrelov use the embodied presence of the actor to engage with militarised gender norms. When he exits the shower, the audience's attention is focused not only on the actor's body but also the green camouflage uniform that is deliberately positioned in their eye line stage left. In her article 'The Structure of Plasticity: Resistance and Accommodation in Russian New Drama', Susanna Weygandt argues that New Drama productions integrate 'material objects as actants in the narrative' (Weygandt 2016, 121). In *The Soldier*, the material presence of the soldier's military uniform acts in accordance with Weygandt's observations on the contribution of objects in New Drama. Lighting is used to introduce the presence of the items halfway through the performance and Volkostrelov creatively uses the uniform as a way to progress the narrative of *The Soldier*. The neatly folded clothes hint that the soldier had laid them out planning to dress after his shower only to conceive his final courageous decision to desert the army during the action of the piece. The presence of the soldier's uniform reflects Morgan's observation that 'often men in public space are, officially or unofficially, uniformed as soldiers, policemen, clergy or stockbrokers' (Morgan 1993, 73). Morgan writes that 'the nature of uniform is then to divert attention away from the particularities and idiosyncrasies of specific bodies and to focus on generalised public roles

and statuses' (Morgan 1993, 73). In his public media stunts, Putin dresses in military attire to codify and give authority to his performances. It is precisely though the actor's naked body that resistance to this facet of Putin's leadership is conducted in *The Soldier*. The live embodiment of a naked man stripped of his uniform and status as a soldier is, therefore, a transgression that strips away the Kremlin's fabricated mediatisation of militarised hegemonic masculinity.

It is worth pointing out, that the soldier's body in the performance does not in fact physically conform to the hegemonic ideal and the claim that 'the warrior still seems to be a key symbol of masculinity' (Morgan 1994, 165). Chinarev's body is not muscular or physically imposing, and his appearance betrays a youthful inexperience that suggests his subordinate status in the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity (see Image 3). Instead, the central focus on the soldier's body in a silent and intimate space not only acts as a rejection of the Kremlin's theatrical public spectacles but also enables a crucial renegotiation of how militarised hegemonic masculinities have ideologically reaffirmed the dominant political narratives controlled by the Putin regime. The use of the embodied presence of the male actor contests and disrupts the idealised paradigm of militarised hegemonic masculinity promoted by the Kremlin. In a country where soldiers who do not conform to the regime's constructed hegemonic masculinity are excluded from public discourse, *The Soldier* opens up new avenues for debate and opposition towards the Kremlin through the staging of marginalised voices and 'subordinate' representations of the male body in the public sphere. The play, therefore, subverts the mediatised portrayals of soldiers' bodies and makes visible those who have been excluded from Putin's state-building strategies. In doing so, this important act of opposition makes a vital contribution towards resisting embodied notions of the warrior hero that define contemporary hegemonic masculinities as they have been constructed by the Putin regime.

Conclusion

Playwright and co-founder of Teatr.doc, Ivan Vyrypaev, has recently argued that the current Russian government 'has the right to interfere with, control, direct, regulate, oversee, and finally, to develop the cultural process' (Vyrypaev 2018, 40). As the threat to freedom of speech in the arts grows under the Putin regime, plays such as *The Soldier* provide a vital site for articulating alternative narratives that challenge and subvert the normative discourses propagated by state-controlled media. In her 2009 study *Theatre Censorship in Britain: Silencing, Censure and Suppression*, Helen Freshwater writes that: 'it seems that overt censorship can also be an inadvertent spur to creativity' (Freshwater 2009, 164). In other words, even when artists are faced with the spectre of censorship, they find creative ways of challenging and overcoming state oppression through their art. As Putin has implemented a clampdown on the arts, Russia's innovative theatre makers have continued to produce provocative new shows under the increasing threat of censorship. Freshwater's suggestion that theatre makers will often find creative responses to counter the state's active involvement in arts and culture is manifested in *The Soldier* as the innovative confrontation of Putin's casting of the Second Chechen War as a grand analogy for his own political strength and the state's relentless propagation of militarised patriotism and gender norms. By withholding an explanation for how or why the soldier

Image 3. Pavel Chinarev in *The Soldier*, Teatr.doc, Moscow, 2011. Photo: Polina Koroleva. Courtesy of Teatr.doc.

is deserting the army and removing the immediate spectre of repression from the play, *The Soldier* underscores the ways in which the systematic violence inherent in the Russian military invisibly supports nationalist dogma and Putin's leadership, prompting a wider interrogation of the exploitative use of conscript soldiers as a political tool.

This article has argued that Teatr.doc's production of *The Soldier* deconstructs the established conventions of dramatic writing in twenty-first century Russia, providing a significant theatrical critique of the Putin regime's reiteration of militarised patriotism and mandatory conscription in the wake of the Second Chechen War. By exploring the production in the context of the New Drama movement, I have suggested that Pryazhko's urgent portrayal of a young soldier in the moment he takes the life-changing decision to desert the army assaults its audience's pre-conceived understanding of dramatic form, while the embodied presence of the male actor subversively disrupts the state-sponsored media discourse surrounding the Second Chechen War as well as Putin's own militarised public performances. The performative unspoken actions represented in *The Soldier* calls attention to the brutal practice of *dedovshchina* and the exploitative use of soldiers as idealised representations of militarised hegemonic masculinity. I have argued that by foregrounding silent and diurnal actions, the understated acts performed in *The Soldier* are presented as micronarratives of dissent and protest again the regime that reject the macronarratives of mediatised spectacles of war and militarised masculinity in Putin's Russia. In this way, Pryazhko focuses his audiences' attention on how marginalised citizens can be made visible and provides new alternative subject positions. Despite the ephemeral length of the production, it provides a crucial space to reinterpret the politics of the Putin regime and intervene in the public sphere.

In providing such a reading of *The Soldier*, this article has gone beyond previous English-language studies into New Drama, which have offered a substantive investigation into the movement's linguistic innovations but have neglected to provide a detailed analysis of theatre and performance's significant contribution to the creation of a cohesive oppositional political discourse. In doing so, I have underscored the potential of New Drama practitioners to employ innovative theatrical aesthetics to intervene in the public sphere and contest the autocratic and nationalistic practices of the Putin regime by articulating alternative and dissident experiences excluded from mainstream political discourse. While it remains to be seen how playwrights and theatre practitioners will continue to respond to further political developments in their art in the future, in the wake of Putin's re-election for a further six years on 18 March 2018, Russian theatre makers' continuing response to the authoritarian politics of the regime remains an urgent and important subject in contemporary theatre and performance.

Notes

1. For example, *I am Free* (*Ya Svoboden*, 2012), produced by Volkostrelov's Post Theatre in St. Petersburg, took the form of the projection of 535 photographs captured by Pryazhko in Minsk, which were accompanied by thirteen captions, sequentially projected every seven seconds to create a complete, unspoken story.
2. A notable exception is John Freedman's article 'The Art of Seeing: Dmitry Volkostrelov Interprets Pavel Pryazhko'.
3. As well as attending the production and the post-show discussions that follow it, I also have access to a single camera recording of the piece, as well as a number of transcripts of the post-show debates, kindly shared with me by Teatr.doc's co-founder Elena Gremina.
4. For more detail of the Royal Court's involvement in the development of New Drama, see Aston and Thomas (Aston and O'Thomas 2015, 77–83, 136–40).

5. It should be noted that New Drama was not always positively received in Russia. It received harsh opprobrium from both theatre-makers and critics for its perceived lack of artistic quality and faced accusations that its association with the Royal Court made it a theatre of foreign influence. Interestingly, this cultural unease surrounding the genealogy of New Drama expressed by some Russian critics is further marshalled with wider debates elsewhere in Europe that articulate pressing concerns about neocolonial performance practices at the start of the twenty-first century. For example, see Nikčević (Nikčević 2005).
6. Gremina and Ugarov opened Teatr.doc in central Moscow in 2002; Kazantsev co-founded the Playwright and Director Centre along with Mikhail Roshchin in 1998; Kolyada established a playwriting course at the Yekaterinburg Theatre Institute in 1994 and subsequently opened the Kolyada Theatre in 2001.
7. This point has astutely been made by Duška Radosavljević, who observes that Russian theatre directors have a much less text-centered approach to theatre making in general than, for example, their associates in the United Kingdom or the United States (Radosavljević 2013, 53).
8. *Mat* was a phenomenon that appeared in Russian literature during Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of *perestroika* in the 1980s as a means of challenging and subverting the linguistic constraints of official Soviet discourse. It is defined by Russian literary scholar Eliot Borenstein as 'forbidden words describing the human anatomy, sexual activity, and the rest of the physiological functions' (Borenstein 2008, 58).
9. I use John Freedman's translation of Pryazhko's lines as included in *Real and Phantom Pains: An Anthology of New Drama* (Freedman 2014a, 110).
10. Unless otherwise noted, translations in this paper are my own.
11. In his article on Pryazhko and Volkostrelov's theatre, Freedman describes how 'two years after seeing *The Soldier* [...] I debate questions the director raised but did not answer' (Freedman 2014b, 53).
12. I am grateful to Elena Gremina for sharing with me a number of recordings of the post-show discussions staged at Teatr.doc.
13. Eichler's comments are echoed by Laura Prividera and John Howard, who note that 'the continued ideological essentializing of soldiers as "masculine men" calls into question the very legitimacy of the female soldier.' (Prividera and Howard III 2006, 30).

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