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**Books, arts and culture**

## Slava Polunin

# Send in the clowns

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SUNDAY morning at Slava Polunin's house in Marne, south-east of Paris, is an eye-popping affair. Circus acrobats entangle themselves in elegant inversions in his rehearsal room, while jugglers practise their routines. The Polunin residence looks like something sprung from the combined imagination of Lewis Carroll and Salvador Dalí. One room is wholly lined in fur, with steps leading up to a womb-like bedroom cocoon. Outside, a chicken house is egg-shaped and the outside dining area is designed in the shape of a ship, with an upturned anchor on top. Mr Polunin, an avant-garde performance artist since the days of glasnost, dreams up idea for his shows while lying on an old hospital bed that has been adapted into a boat. It floats unsteadily on the Marne river, which flows through his grounds.



Russia's best-known artistic clown is a muscular presence with tiny blue eyes and a beard of vast marshmallow fluffiness. Together with his troupe of clowns, including family members and recruits from Russia and beyond, he has been preparing another road-show, currently underway in Britain and due to culminate in his annual spectacular, Slava's Snowshow, at the Royal Festival Hall from December 17th. Behind the quirkiness lies a slick international business. The Snowshow has toured in 30 countries and attracts enthusiasts from Japan to New York, where it was nominated for a Tony theatre award. The Polunins are also adept at finding new markets and fresh twists on clownery. He has worked with the ex-Monty Python actor, Terry Gilliam, and a collaboration with Os Gemeos, the upmarket Brazilian graffiti artist is in the works.

Now 64, Mr Polunin has taken the clowning business seriously since the early 1980s, when he first organised a mime parade in Leningrad (now St Petersburg), flouting communist strictures on artistic events. "I got away with it because there weren't any rules specifically about mime artists," he recalls. Raisa Gorbachev, the wife of the Soviet leader, was reported to be an admirer and the authorities looked the other way. Mr Polunin's mime classes and alternative pantomime events, the "academy of fools", grew to several hundred performers. It bore traces of Russian avant-garde directors Meyerhold and Stanislavsky, as well as Dadaist influences. He sent flaming coffins down

the Neva river and, as travel restrictions eased across eastern Europe in 1989, his mime-circus show, the “Caravan of Peace”, began touring Europe.

Mr Polunin was lured back from his French residence, part-time, to Russia in early 2013 to run the once-prestigious Fontanka circus in St Petersburg, which was beset by arguments over its future and rickety finances. His plans for more artistic shows clashed with traditionalists, and the future of that co-operation now looks uncertain. More broadly, Mr Polunin’s cheerily anarchistic work sits oddly in an autocratic Russia where Vladimir Putin has called on artists to provide more upbeat performances and has banned swearing on stage.

Like many Russian performers, the country’s best-known clown thus finds himself in a position familiar from Soviet times—awkwardly skirting a new autocracy that looks a lot like the old one. Along with other cultural figures he was asked to sign a statement supporting the Russian president in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine earlier this year, but declined, moving back to France until he was promised that he would not be pressured to sign.

Questions about today’s Russia are met with convenient vagueness. His reaction to events, he insists, is best seen in his portrayal of the human condition. The results are mesmerising stage journeys through life’s absurdities, missed opportunities and sub-conscious desires. He thinks Samuel Beckett “had the human condition about right, but there is no need to be miserable about that”. Audiences watch a mime character preparing for suicide with a noose—and end up cheering a finale involving a ticker-tape storm and giant coloured balls, against a haunting, electronic soundscape. “The clown brings us anarchy, freedom and intuition,” Mr Polunin concludes. “It’s a very Russian combination.”

*Slava's Snowshow is at the Royal Festival Hall, in London, from December 17th 2014-January 5th 2015*