

Title: Profaning the Provinces: Space, Place and Childbirth in Vasiliï Sigarev's Drama "Black Milk"

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Vasiliï Sigarev (born in 1978) has emerged as one of the most prominent and successful dramatists of the movement known as "New Drama"—the extraordinary proliferation of new theatrical writing that characterized Russian culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Despite the frequency with which his works have been staged in both Russia and in the West, and the numerous awards that he has garnered, Sigarev's dramas have remained relatively unexplored by critics. (Birgit Beumers' and Mark Lipovetsky's "Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama" [Bristol, 2009] represents the notable exception to this trend.) This paper—part of a larger project examining the poetics of place in Sigarev's oeuvre—provides a close analysis of the drama "Black Milk" (2000). In this two-act play about a traveling couple from Moscow—one of whom is heavily pregnant—selling overpriced toasters to hapless provincials, Sigarev presents his most explicit encounter between characters from the capital and those from Russia's depths. I will argue that, in "Black Milk" as well as in several other dramas, Sigarev creates a grotesque space, one characterized by the erosion of the borders between the sacred and the profane. When the pregnant Muscovite is forced to give birth in this anonymous and forsaken locale, she experiences an unexpected desire to resacralize her maternal body and to retreat into the depths of the Russian interior in search of moral renewal—a desire stimulated by an encounter with the previously crass and drunken locals, now presented as founts of positive values. My reading of "Black Milk" will shed light on the conflicts between center and periphery and between supposedly authentic "Russian" values and the nascent capitalism and materialism characteristic of the post-Soviet period.